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Ministry of Mines
Government of Ontario
99 Wellesley Street West
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May 15, 2025

Re: WWF-Canada's Concerns regarding the Special Economic Zones Act, 2025

World Wildlife Fund Canada (WWF-Canada) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the Government of Ontario's proposed *Special Economic Zones Act, 2025*, put forward in Schedule 9 of the omnibus *Bill 5* tabled on April 17, 2025. WWF-Canada is the country's largest international conservation organization. With the active support of more than 150,000 Canadians who care about nature, we help create the conditions to reverse the steep decline of wildlife, at home and internationally. We do this by working to uphold the priorities of Indigenous communities and advocating for improved industry practices and government regulations that will reduce or eliminate negative impacts to wildlife, biodiversity and community well-being from industrial sectors, including mining.

WWF-Canada believes that *Bill 5* is a flawed approach to responding to a perceived economic emergency. WWF-Canada's research and on-the-ground experience indicates that a strong legal and regulatory framework is the best approach to balancing economic benefits with support for the well-being of nature and communities. Repealing the *Endangered Species Act, 2007* and creating Special Economic Zones based on unknown criteria that are governed by extensive Ministerial powers is not red tape reduction. Instead, these legislative changes will increase the risk of ecological degradation due to pollution, destruction of forested land and destruction of ecologically valuable wetlands, peatlands and watersheds, including associated water tables. The proposed changes also pose a threat to the climate by releasing greenhouse gases from nature's vast carbon stores into the atmosphere.

We urge the province to re-think *Bill 5* and consider development in a way that centers the protection of communities, nature and wildlife in decision-making. The following comments expand on our primary concerns with the *Special Economic Zones Act, 2025*.

Sweeping Ministerial Powers: Ontario's existing legislative regime has evolved over decades to protect both people and the environment from harmful development practices. As currently drafted, the creation of "special economic zones" allows development projects, including mines and infrastructure projects, and "trusted proponents" to be exempt from provincial and municipal laws which could include key laws aimed at protecting the environment such as the *Environmental Protection Act*, *Environmental Assessment Act*, *Environmental Bill of Rights*, and *Clean Water Act*. Crucially, in addition to environmental protection, many of these laws are often triggers for public and Indigenous consultation requirements. Note that WWF-Canada has also provided comment on our concerns about the repeal of the *Endangered Species Act, 2007* (submitted to ERO #025-0380).

Bill 5 provides examples of projects that will already be exempt from environmental law:

- the *Rebuilding Ontario Place Act* will exempt that project from Part II of the *Environmental Bill of Rights, 1993*, which provides for public participation in decision-making
- changes to the *Environmental Assessment Act* will remove the requirement for a comprehensive environmental assessment from the most advanced mining project in the “Ring of Fire” (i.e. Eagle’s Nest).

Keeping with the latter example is instructive. Building a mine and related infrastructure in the peatlands of northern Ontario is a complex and highly technical process that should be informed by the best available science and knowledge and must allow for the highest levels of public and Indigenous participation. Such projects should *not* advance without the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent of Indigenous Peoples. The proposed deregulation found within *Bill 5* should not be the government’s approach to building complex projects that will have long-lasting ecological and social impacts. If existing laws are deemed burdensome or unnecessary, they should be amended through a transparent process that allows for input from developers, the public, and Indigenous communities, and balances environmental protection with sustainable economic growth.

Ontario needs to consider past outcomes of an under-regulated mining industry. The province is home to more than 5,700 abandoned mines, for which the public foots the bill – and the risk – of cleanup. Vesting Cabinet with the power to exempt development projects from laws that have been put in place to avoid these types of harmful and costly legacies is a threat to natural systems and the communities that rely on them.

Special Economic Zone Criteria: The lack of detail in the proposed *Special Economic Zones Act, 2025* raises questions about how the government will respect the constitutionally protected rights of Indigenous Peoples, thus failing to advance reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples at a time when it should be of the highest priority.

The *Special Economic Zones Act, 2025* and omnibus *Bill 5* have the potential to set Ontario back decades with respect to both environmental protection and Indigenous consultation. These Acts should be rethought and replaced with a legislative and policy agenda that advances *responsible* development and reconciliation. This is the only way to create long term, sustainable and just economies that benefit all Ontarians by protecting communities, nature and wildlife.

Sincerely,



Karen Saunders
Vice President, Wildlife & Industry
WWF-Canada