

## **Proposed boundaries for the regional consolidation of Ontario's conservation authorities**

The proposed consolidation of Conservation Authorities represents a major restructuring of environmental governance in Ontario. Conservation Authorities are critical for protecting watersheds, wetlands, forests, floodplains, and biodiversity, and they provide local expertise for environmental planning, conservation, and emergency response. These natural systems also play an essential role in mitigating climate change impacts and supporting resilient communities.

### **Key Concerns**

#### **1. Reduced environmental monitoring and enforcement**

Consolidation may result in fewer staff dedicated to inspections and enforcement, shifting the focus toward administrative efficiency or development priorities rather than conservation. This risks greater environmental degradation, weaker ecosystem resilience, and reduced capacity for climate adaptation.

If the intent is to standardize policies, fees, and technical requirements, reducing approval timelines from 36 days to just 7 is unlikely to achieve that goal. Such an abrupt change will almost certainly create transitional chaos and confusion, slowing permitting rather than accelerating it. A more effective approach would be for the responsible Ontario ministry to establish consistent province-wide standards under the Conservation Authorities Act. Conservation Authorities also carry many responsibilities beyond permitting, and the government could strengthen, or require, better use of the Conservation Ontario network to share expertise and best practices.

Eliminating local boards of directors further distances citizens from decisions that directly affect clean water, conservation, and community well-being. It is challenging to see how meaningful local governance can function across such large and diverse geographic areas.

Special consideration may also be required for particularly large or unique conservation regions, such as the Huron–Superior Region Conservation Authority, which spans a vast and diverse territory, and Lake Simcoe, whose ecological sensitivity, unique watershed characteristics, and rapid development pressures may warrant a distinct governance model.

#### **2. Cumulative impact on planning and decision-making**

Watershed-scale management relies on timely, locally-informed decisions. Consolidation could slow response times, fragment ecological oversight, and weaken coordination, undermining long-term conservation goals and the landscape's ability to buffer climate impacts such as floods, droughts, and storm events.

### **3. Loss of local accountability and community input**

Local residents, municipalities, and stakeholders currently have meaningful opportunities to shape decisions about their watersheds and conservation priorities. Centralizing authority risks reducing public engagement and diminishing local oversight, ultimately weakening ecological stewardship and community-based climate resilience.

While provincial priorities such as housing, economic growth, and infrastructure development are important, the core mandate of Conservation Authorities is to manage natural hazards and protect watershed health, work grounded in decades of local knowledge and on-the-ground experience. If authority is centralized, how will the voices of these knowledgeable individuals, communities, and municipal partners be preserved and heard?

### **4. Weakened protection of natural systems**

Conservation Authorities provide science-based, site-specific management of land and water resources. Consolidation could dilute expertise, making it harder to respond effectively to ecological risks, particularly in wetlands, forests, and flood-prone areas.

Healthy ecosystems also contribute to climate change mitigation, through carbon storage, flood control, and temperature regulation. Reduced protection of these systems undermines Ontario's capacity to address climate change and extreme weather events.

### **5. Ongoing but non-mandatory habitat and species protection work**

While some Conservation Authorities continue to deliver habitat restoration, species-at-risk programs, and stewardship initiatives, these activities are now considered non-mandatory under current legislation. Their survival depends heavily on municipal agreements, local funding, and internal capacity. This creates a fragile and uneven system in which essential conservation work can be reduced or discontinued, leaving critical habitats, species-at-risk, and climate-resilient landscapes increasingly vulnerable.

Although we strongly agree on the importance of preserving these non-mandated programs, the Ontario government has explicitly targeted these "over-and-above" activities, arguing that they should not be funded by provincial taxpayers. Yet many of these initiatives provide direct, measurable benefits to taxpayers such as preventing costly flood damage, protecting drinking water sources, safeguarding fisheries and recreation economies, and maintaining the natural infrastructure that reduces long-term climate and infrastructure costs. Such programs are not extras; they are prudent, cost-saving investments in public safety and community resilience.

### **6. Threats to species-at-risk and sensitive habitats**

Many CAs run programs that protect endangered species and critical ecological areas. Centralized decision-making could lead to inconsistent prioritization, leaving species and habitats more vulnerable, especially in areas facing urban expansion or infrastructure projects.

## **Conclusion / Recommendation**

Maintaining strong, locally-informed Conservation Authorities is essential for protecting Ontario's natural systems, preventing flooding, conserving biodiversity, and supporting resilient, climate-adapted communities. I support the continuation of strong, independent Local Conservation Authorities, like that of the Lake Simcoe watershed. Any consolidation if it must occur, should carefully evaluate the impact on local expertise, mitigation timelines, habitat and watershed protection, species-at-risk programs, climate mitigation and adaptation functions, and community engagement to ensure environmental protection is not compromised. Special attention should be given to safeguarding the non-mandatory programs that remain crucial for biodiversity, ecosystem resilience, and climate action.

## Sources

[https://conservationontario.ca/fileadmin/pdf/fact\\_sheets/2023\\_CO\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://conservationontario.ca/fileadmin/pdf/fact_sheets/2023_CO_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/conservation-authorities>

<https://cela.ca/we-need-our-conservation-authorities/>