



**Conservation
ONTARIO**
Natural Champions

Federal 2021 Pre-Budget Submission Recommendations for Investments for Economic Recovery

August 4, 2020



Flooding and Erosion



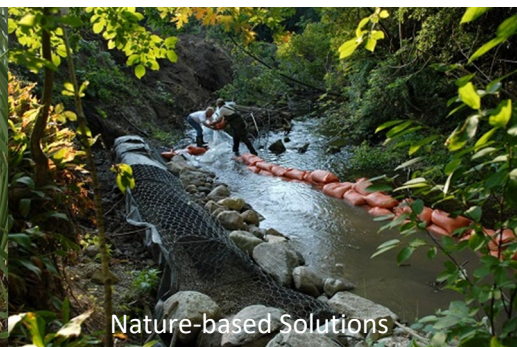
Greenspaces



Great Lakes



Wetlands



Nature-based Solutions



Tree Planting

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION #1: Increase investments and modify requirements for a number of current programs including Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund (DMAF), Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP) and Great Lakes Protection Initiative (GLPI) to generate job growth (particularly in engineering, applied science, forestry, landscaping trades and agriculture sectors) and to spur economic activity.

- Include federal contributions of 75 – 100%
- Ensure eligibility of smaller projects
- Include environmental assessment, project planning design elements and construction as eligible work
- Include monitoring of environmental improvements, water quality/quantity, air quality, forest cover, biodiversity (including wetlands and other natural areas)

RECOMMENDATION #2: Fund flood and erosion control infrastructure studies and repair projects through contributions to the Water Erosion Control Infrastructure (WECI) program as well as fund low impact development and stormwater management projects.

RECOMMENDATION #3: Invest in floodplain mapping to provide information that keeps people and businesses out of flood-prone areas, thereby avoiding significant costs from damages and business disruptions.

RECOMMENDATION #4: Provide infrastructure funding for conservation areas (natural /recreation parks) and greenways owned by Ontario’s conservation authorities.

- Investments will enable accommodation of more visitors, safely, for hiking, day use and camping activities.
- Would include improvements to hydro and water services, washroom retrofits, entrance gates for contactless entry, trail upgrades (one-way loops, and wider); as well as improvements to parking, signage, and – with additional visitors - invasive species control and protection of species at risk.

RECOMMENDATION #5: Provide funding for green natural infrastructure programs including activities such as habitat restoration and rehabilitation projects focusing on wetlands, forests / woodlots, natural shoreline and riparian, streams, invasive species and species at risk.

RECOMMENDATION #6: Continue and expand funding for the current 50 Million Tree Program in Ontario and through the proposed new \$2 Billion Tree Planting program, including investments in outreach, nursery stock, monitoring of planted trees, machinery, supplies and landowner grants.

RECOMMENDATION #7: Provide sustained Great Lakes funding towards Rural Clean Water Programs to help maintain soil health for agriculture/food security and reduce nutrient loadings to the Great Lakes. Funding should be directed to activities including stream fencing, shoreline riparian planting, tree planting, manure storage, well decommissioning, erosion control, irrigation management, nutrient management, cover crops, natural area enhancement, wetland creation, stormwater management, and septic systems.

RECOMMENDATION #8: Continue support for the Water Survey of Canada in order to ensure real time water quality and quantity monitoring in order to monitor the success of local actions, tracking climate trends, validating models as well as forecasting and managing flood events.

About Conservation Authorities

Conservation Ontario (CO) represents the network of Ontario's 36 conservation authorities (CAs), local watershed-based natural resource agencies located throughout the province. Almost all of Ontario's population (95%) lives in a watershed managed by conservation authorities. Conservation authorities are legislated under the Province of Ontario's *Conservation Authorities Act*.

Conservation authorities deliver a wide range of watershed management programs and have worked very successfully with the Federal government for many years. Outcomes from these collaborations protect Great Lakes water quality, build local watershed resilience and address growing climate impacts with nature-based solutions.

This submission makes a number of recommendations which can help to kick start local economies by putting people back to work, engaging a diverse range of economic sectors and helping to support the development of the 'green' economy. The recommendations suggest investments in the following areas:

- Existing critical flood and erosion control infrastructure repair and construction (including studies) which protects life and property, and helps to avoid even higher damage costs associated with flooding in Ontario;
- Improvements to trails and greenspaces that will enable CAs' conservation areas to continue to safely welcome the growing number of visitors and campers;
- Nature-based solutions such as green infrastructure, including tree planting and shoreline protection;
- Rural Clean Water programs that help to protect Great Lakes water quality and quantity; and
- Continued support for the Water Survey of Canada.

Flood and Erosion Hazard and Disaster Risk Management

Conservation authorities have a successful track record of partnering with the Federal government on flood and erosion hazard and disaster management projects. Additional funding will enable conservation authorities to provide local employment opportunities and to address aging infrastructure necessary to keep flood and erosion hazards from becoming disasters.

The federal National Disaster Mitigation Program (NDMP) and the Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund (DMAF) have been instrumental in helping to reduce and/or prevent costly flooding in Ontario. The NDMP has significantly advanced improvements in floodplain mapping. Conservation authorities have been involved in 127 different NDMP projects with 81 of them targeted to floodplain mapping. Floodplain mapping provides significant return on investment because it keeps people and businesses out of flood prone areas.

These programs have also allowed CAs to implement small scale projects such as dykes and erosion control, stormwater / low impact development as well as financially supporting multiple projects within large urban communities. Some studies have shown a return on investment around 6:1, meaning that for every dollar invested in mitigation measures, \$6 is saved in future damages.

Conservation authority water and erosion control infrastructure annually already helps to avoid at least \$150 M in damages to properties. We deliver this program in partnership with the Province of Ontario and local municipalities. Studies and repairs for major maintenance are supported in part by Ontario's Water and Erosion Control Infrastructure program (WECI) for a total project investment of \$10 million (Provincial contribution is \$5 million). In response to increasing risk associated with climate change (e.g. high water levels and flooding/erosion), the 2020/2021 funding envelope for the program is oversubscribed by almost two-fold with an estimated total project cost of more than \$19 million for 102 studies and repair project submissions from 30 conservation authorities across the Province. These

shovel ready studies and repair projects are an investment in jobs and economic activity (e.g. consultants, contractors, materials) and are vital in protecting the people of Ontario from flood and erosion risk.

Tweaks to current and renewed federal programs could help those not currently eligible under DMAF or WECl and address the gap between available funding and potential projects. Renewing programs like the NDMP would help generate the flood mapping needed to make decisions about many of these projects. This would also provide much needed economic stimulus, and flood and shoreline erosion protection benefits to small, rural and northern communities.

Greenspaces for Health and Well-Being

Pandemic conditions have revealed just how vital greenspaces are to Ontarians. They need them for social, physical and mental health benefits. Agencies who manage parks, conservation areas, greenways and other greenspaces are overwhelmed with the increased number of visitors as a result of COVID-19. In order to accommodate more visitors, today and beyond the pandemic, there are a number of things that should be done to ensure the public health and safety of visitors.

Conservation authorities own and manage approximately 500 conservation and natural areas. Of these, approximately one third are open to the general public (270+). The advantage of conservation areas is:

- They are close to cities and towns and so they are quite easily accessible;
- They offer a wide range of scenic opportunities to enjoy, and explore natural features (wetlands, beaches, etc.); and to hike, cycle, rock climb, boat, fish, camp, snowshoe and more.

Approximately 8 million people annually visit conservation areas across the province and often these visits generate significant spillover economic and tourism benefits to nearby communities' cultural amenities, restaurants and shops.

Funding is needed, mainly towards infrastructure projects, in order to more safely accommodate visitors. Federal funding should be provided for trail expansion and improvements (loops and wider trails), widened bridges, improved parking, touchless gates and pay systems, visitor monitoring systems and consistent signage.

Nature-based Climate Solutions

Additional funding for habitat restoration, rehabilitation and enhancement provides multiple benefits including Great Lakes water quality, flood control, maintaining biodiversity, sequestering carbon, building climate resilience and protecting air quality.

In 2018, conservation authorities engaged close to 800 landowners resulting in almost 1500 projects that improved wetlands, restored habitats, restored or rehabilitated streams, shoreline and riparian areas (65 stream/fish habitat projects), managed invasive species and protected species at risk. CAs also plant approximately 2 million trees across Ontario's watersheds annually. A lot of this work happens in collaboration with Forests Ontario and the successful 50 M Tree Program. Conservation authorities also map and monitor local cover.

Conservation authority tree planting and habitat restoration/rehabilitation projects are typically delivered in partnership with many other agencies and local businesses. Leveraging these resources results in much broader benefits. Total value of these projects was \$18M which was spread across local communities among project planning consultants, supply and materials procurement, contractors and other service providers.

Forests Ontario has documented the impact of tree planting and restoration programs on local economies finding that the annual GDP impact on the Canadian economy in southern Ontario is estimated to be \$12.7M. This equates to a 3:1 return rate for the 50M Tree program. Conservation authorities plant over 50 percent of the trees funded under this program.

Demand for this nature-based solutions exceeds funding availability and is a great tool for local business stimulation.

Healthy Great Lakes

Funding to conservation authorities' Rural Water Quality / Clean Water programs helps to maintain soil health for agriculture, protect drinking water and reduce nutrient loading to the Great Lakes. This is documented in the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement as well as through the Lake Erie Action Plan and Healthy Lake Huron. These are often delivered on behalf of municipalities to help protect drinking water supplies.

In 2018, CAs engaged 737 landowners resulting in 683 projects (82% agricultural). Over \$3M grant dollars were provided to landowners to implement projects including windbreaks, soil erosion control, manure storage and stream buffers. The total value of these projects is estimated to be approximately \$7.5M to the rural and agricultural economy which went to design, materials, contractors and farmers for implementation. There is greater demand for projects than funding available.

Under the Great Lakes Protection Initiative (GLPI), eight conservation authorities have been implementing 17 projects valued at \$3.7M over four years. These projects help farmers and communities to protect drinking water sources, manage rural and urban stormwater runoff, reduce flooding as well as restore, manage and monitor wetlands. These activities help address the impact of climate change and improve water quality.

New funding could increase the scale, scope and intensity of our efforts. Recent economic studies undertaken in the United States estimate that every \$1 spent on Great Lakes restoration initiatives is projected to generate more than \$3 in additional economic activity.

Monitoring Watersheds

Real time water quantity and quality data and other information provided through the Water Survey of Canada is critical to continuing to track conditions and climate change impacts in Ontario's watersheds. This information supports decisions about local watershed improvements. It also enables trend assessment and model validation required to forecast and manage flood events and to protect quality of drinking water sources.

Conclusion

It is our belief that it makes sense to invest in projects and programs with experienced and tested partners, like Ontario's conservation authorities. Conservation authorities' activities contribute many additional co-benefits to municipalities, struggling local businesses and other sectors. Federal investments in conservation authority projects and programs will help to build the foundation for a greener economy, positioning our communities for a more resilient, healthy and prosperous future.

More Information

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