

Discussion Paper

Conservation Authorities Act

A review of the roles, responsibilities, funding and governance of conservation authorities under the Conservation Authorities Act.



Photo credits:

Cover photos (left to right): Grand River Conservation Authority (Caledonia Dam); Otonabee Region Conservation Authority; Otonabee Region Conservation Authority

Page 6: Conservation Halton

Page 21: Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority

Page 27: E. Hartlen; Long Point Region Conservation Authority

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1. Introduction

The *Conservation Authorities Act*, administered by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF), enables two or more municipalities in a common watershed to establish a conservation authority in conjunction with the province. The purpose of a conservation authority is to deliver a local resource management program at the watershed scale for both provincial and municipal interests.

Conservation authorities have played a significant role in Ontario's natural resource management landscape for nearly 70 years, establishing a successful legacy of resource stewardship and an impressive record of protecting people, property, and communities from water-related natural hazards (e.g. flooding, drought, erosion etc.). With the increasing pressures of Climate Change on the environment, it is imperative that conservation authorities have the proper tools to successfully build upon this legacy.

Conservation authorities are unique organizations, established on watershed rather than political boundaries in order to better serve local needs and allow for resource management from a science-based perspective. Using the tools provided within the *Conservation Authorities Act*, and with support from participating municipalities and the province, conservation authorities protect people from water-related natural hazards, provide recreational and educational opportunities, support science and research, and conserve and protect the natural environment. Collectively, conservation authorities are the second-largest landowner in the province after the Crown.

The framework and conditions for natural resource management in Ontario have changed significantly since the Act's creation, and the way conservation authorities operate within that framework has changed along with it. Resource management has become increasingly complex due to increases in population numbers and density, the expansion of agencies from all levels of government involved in resource management and environmental activities and new challenges such as addressing climate change further complicating resource management decisions. In addition, conservation authorities have been evolving as organizations, growing their funding sources and influence and accepting and being assigned additional roles that extend their responsibilities into additional areas of natural resource management and environmental protection. At the same time, the disparity among conservation authorities in resourcing and capacity has and continues to increase.

Ontario's Conservation Authorities

Ontario has 36 conservation authorities – the vast majority of which are located in southern Ontario.

Over 12 million people, or 90% of the province's population, live within a conservation authority's jurisdiction.

As a result of these and for other reasons the MNRF is seeking to engage ministries, municipalities, Aboriginal communities, conservation authorities, stakeholders and the public in a review of the *Conservation Authorities Act* to ensure that the Act is meeting the needs of Ontarians in a modern context.

Interest in a review of the *Conservation Authorities Act* has been building over the last several years. The Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Service recommended that the MNRF undertake a review of the programs and services delivered by the MNRF and conservation authorities to clarify responsibilities and eliminate any overlap in roles and responsibilities for resource management and environmental protection that are currently shared across levels of government. In addition, municipalities, developers, and conservation authorities have all identified their interest in and support for a formal government review.

The objective of this review is to identify opportunities to improve the legislative, regulatory and policy framework that currently governs the creation, operation and activities of conservation authorities that may be required in the face of a constantly changing environment. The purpose of this discussion paper is to seek feedback on the following three areas:

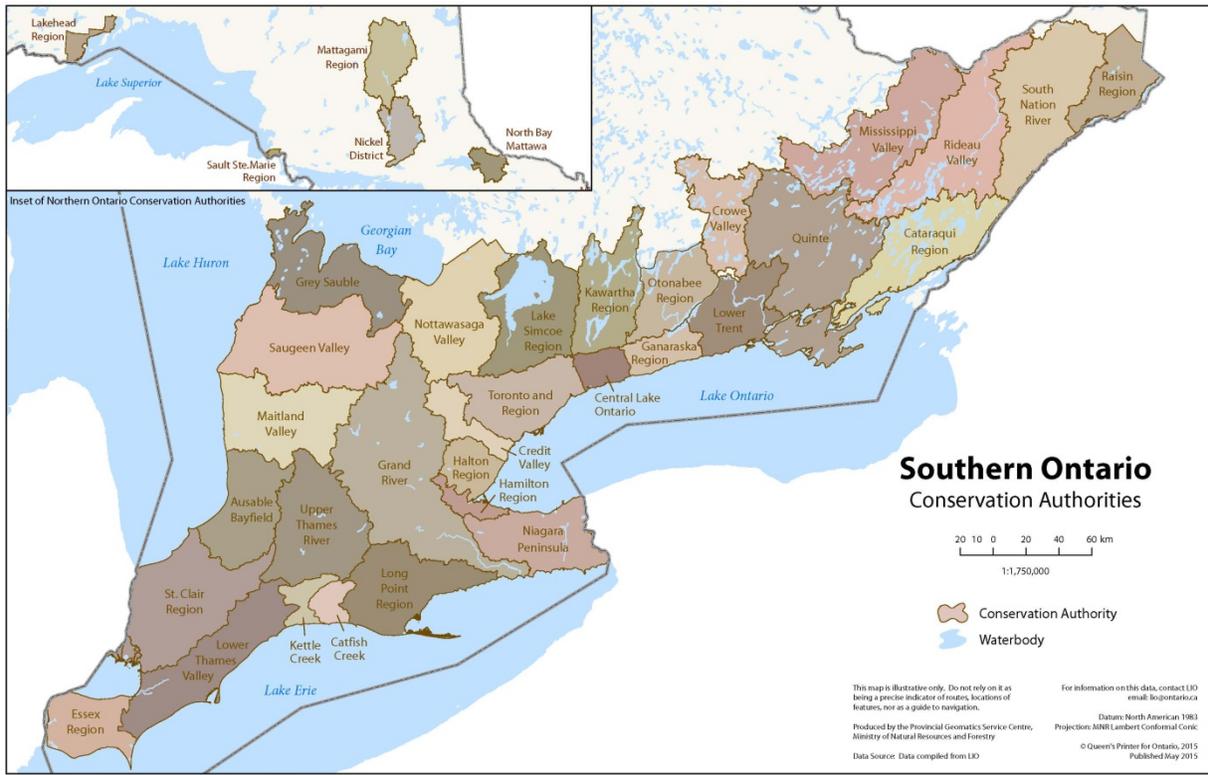
1. *Governance* – the processes, structures, and accountability frameworks within the Act which direct conservation authority decision-making and operations;
2. *Funding Mechanisms* – the mechanisms put in place by the Act to fund conservation authorities; and
3. *Roles and Responsibilities* – the roles and associated responsibilities that the Act enables conservation authorities to undertake.

These areas are all closely linked and need to be considered in an integrated fashion. We ask that you read this discussion paper and focus on the questions that are provided.

This discussion paper represents the first step in the Ministry's review. The feedback received in response to the questions outlined below will help the Ministry identify priority areas for review. If specific changes to the existing legislative, regulatory or policy framework are considered in the future, further public consultation will occur as appropriate, for example through subsequent Environmental Bill of Rights Registry postings.

Your opinions and insights are important to us. This discussion paper outlines a number of ways to engage in the review and we encourage everyone to participate. The review of site-specific permit applications and permitting decisions or other local decisions made by conservation authorities are not within the scope of the Ministry's review.

Figure 1 – Map of conservation authority jurisdictions¹



¹ This map has been produced by the MNR for illustrative purposes only and should not be relied upon as a precise indicator of conservation authority boundaries

2. Conservation Authorities Act - Overview

The *Conservation Authorities Act* was passed in 1946 in response to extensive flooding, erosion, deforestation and soil loss resulting from poor land, water and forestry management practices in prior decades. The Act outlines the process to establish, fund, dissolve, amalgamate and operate a conservation authority.

The creation of the Act and associated conservation authority model was guided by the following principles:

1. Local initiative – The process to form a conservation authority must be initiated and supported by municipalities within a common watershed, and that programs be locally driven and supported.
2. Cost sharing – The costs of the projects should be shared by the municipalities in the authority and the provincial government.
3. Watershed jurisdiction – Conservation authority jurisdictions would, where possible, follow watershed boundaries.

Conservation authority jurisdictions can be loosely characterized in various ways: rural or urban; south-eastern, south-central, or south-western; north or south; or according to revenue or geographic scale. Some conservation authority jurisdictions are less than a full watershed while other conservation authority jurisdictions include multiple watersheds. It is difficult to generalize or to speak about a generic conservation authority as the Act enables a great diversity of organizations in scale and operations, with significant variance in resourcing strategies, board structures, relationships, and local programs and activities.

Incorporation under the Act establishes conservation authorities as a distinct legal entity with a degree of autonomy from the individual municipalities and the province that establish it. Conservation authorities are local public sector organizations similar to hospitals, libraries or school boards – they are not agencies, boards, or commissions of the province.

Section 20 of the *Conservation Authorities Act* sets out the purpose (i.e. objects) of a conservation authority:

The objects of an authority are to establish and undertake, in the area over which it has jurisdiction, a program designed to further the conservation, restoration, development and management of natural resources other than gas, oil, coal and minerals.

The objects of an authority define the potential scope of programs and services which may be delivered by a conservation authority within its area of jurisdiction. The scope of potential programs is intentionally broad, providing each individual conservation authority with flexibility to develop local resource management programs which are tailored to suit local geography, needs and priorities.

The powers granted to a conservation authority to accomplish its objects are outlined within Section 21 of the Act and include, among other things, the power to study the watershed, acquire lands, enter into agreements, erect works and other structures, and charge fees for services.

Amendments to the Act in 1996 and 1998 scoped MNRF approval of conservation authority projects to those completed with MNRF funding and removed provincial appointees from authority boards. These changes gave conservation authorities and participating municipalities greater flexibility to decide local fiscal and program priorities, develop partnerships, and to charge fees for approved services on a cost recovery basis. The province also introduced provisions for conservation authority amalgamation and dissolution and standardized the authority of conservation authorities to regulate development and other activities.

The Act is supported by regulations that direct conservation authorities in the application of levies, the management of conservation areas, and in regulating development and other activities for purposes of public safety and natural hazard management. The province may also make regulations defining any undefined term appearing in the Act. An overview of regulations established under the *Conservation Authorities Act* has been provided in the Appendix.



3. Governance

Conservation authorities are local public sector organizations similar to public health units, hospitals, libraries or school boards – they are not agencies, boards, or commissions of the province as there are no provincial appointees on the authority boards. Under the Act, every authority is established as a corporation governed by a municipally-appointed board of directors. Incorporation under the Act establishes conservation authorities as a distinct legal entity with a degree of autonomy from the individual municipalities and the province that establish it. Under the Act, the board of directors is the conservation authority.

Governance² of conservation authorities has always been shared between the province and participating municipalities. The province has the primary responsibility for establishing a conservation authority (at the request of two or more municipalities), defining the powers of a conservation authority and directing and monitoring provincially approved programs. Municipalities, through municipally appointed boards of directors, have the primary responsibility for directing and overseeing conservation authority operations. The board is responsible for setting strategic and operational policies, and directing and providing oversight of the Authority's senior management. Oversight of day-to-day operations is typically delegated to a general manager or chief administrative officer who is responsible for directing authority staff.

3.1. Conservation Authority Boards

Each conservation authority is governed by a board of directors whose members are appointed by participating municipalities. Board members decide on the programs and policies of the authority, including strategic direction, operational decisions, procurement, staffing and budgets.

The Act lays out the composition of the conservation authority board and some general operational rules, and requires that each conservation authority have administrative policies in place to guide board operations. The Act does not establish a minimum or maximum number of board members however a meeting of the board must have at least three members in order to achieve quorum.

² Governance of public sector organizations involves a set of relationships among an organization's stakeholders, interest groups, citizens, boards, management and the government. These relationships are framed by laws, rules, and requirements, and provide the structure through which the objectives of the organization are defined, operating plans are prepared, performance is monitored, and information is communicated among parties (Institute of Internal Auditors, 2014).

As shown in Figure 2, the number of representatives that each municipality can appoint is based on the population of that municipality within the conservation authority’s jurisdiction.³ Alternatively, the total number of board members of the authority and the number of members that each participating authority may appoint may be determined by an agreement that is confirmed by resolutions passed by the councils of all of the participating municipalities.⁴

There is significant variability in the size of conservation authority boards with some authority boards having as few as five board members while others have as many as 28.⁵ Board members must reside in a participating municipality and may be appointed for no more than three years at a time.⁶

3.2. Relationship with Municipalities

The creation of a conservation authority must be initiated by two or more municipalities located within a common watershed.⁷ Municipalities who want to establish a conservation authority must petition the province to establish the authority in accordance with the requirements of the *Conservation Authorities Act*. Once an authority is created, it can amalgamate with other authorities and more municipalities can join without the involvement of the province.⁸

Participating municipalities determine who to appoint to the board as their representative(s).⁹ Board members are usually elected municipal councillors; however, any individual may be appointed to the conservation authority board.¹⁰ Municipally-appointed representatives have the authority to vote and generally act on behalf of their municipalities.¹¹

Because decisions are made collectively by all the participating municipalities in an authority through the conservation authority board, the amount of control each municipality has over conservation authority decisions varies. For most matters, each representative on the board gets one vote, so that municipalities with a larger number of board representatives (as a result of having larger populations)

Figure 2: Municipal Representation on Conservation Authority Boards

The number of representatives that each municipality can appoint is based on the population of that municipality within the watershed:

Population	Number of representatives
10,000 or less	1
10,000-50,000	2
50,000-100,000	3
100,000-250,000	4
250,000-500,000	5
500,000-1,000,000	6
More than 1,000,000	7

³ *Conservation Authorities Act* Section 2.(2).

⁴ *Conservation Authorities Act* Section 14.(2.1)

⁵ As reported by conservation authorities in 2012

⁶ *Conservation Authorities Act* Section 14.(3) and Section 14.(4)

⁷ *Conservation Authorities Act* Section 3.(1)

⁸ *Conservation Authorities Act* Section 10 and Section 11

⁹ *Conservation Authorities Act* Section 14

¹⁰ In 2012, over 80% of board members were municipally-elected officials

¹¹ *Conservation Authorities Act* Section 2.(3)

have a larger share in decision-making. For votes on the budget, votes are weighted so that each municipality has the same proportion of the vote as the proportion of the budget it pays.

The number of participating municipalities within each conservation authority is very diverse – some conservation authorities have more than twenty participating municipalities, while others have only two. In some conservation authorities, one or two municipalities may have the majority of the votes on the board.

3.3. Relationship with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry

The process to create, operate and fund a conservation authority is established under the *Conservation Authorities Act* and administered by the MNRF. The province approves the creation and dissolution of a conservation authority, the dissolution requiring input from the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry and the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change. The province designates the participating municipalities in the authority, and the authority's area of jurisdiction. The Act establishes the powers of the board and requires the authority to establish operational and administrative procedures. The MNRF provides a minimum standard for operational and administrative procedures which each board can further update or build on.¹²

While the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry is responsible for overseeing the administration of the Act, he or she has limited authority under the Act to intervene in most regular day-to-day conservation authority activities and decisions. Minister's approval is required for projects partially or fully funded by MNRF through provincial grants, for the sale or lease of lands purchased with provincial funding and for the expropriation of land. The Minister cannot intervene in most local resource management or operational decisions.

Prior to Act amendments in the 1990's, the province played a more direct role in overseeing conservation authorities. The province directed conservation authorities by approving their budgets and all projects, appointing provincial representatives to authority boards, selecting the chair of the board, appointing provincial staff to authority advisory committees, and, when requested by the authority, appointing provincial field officers to direct and coordinate the authority's work. While oversight of conservation authorities is still shared between the province and the municipalities that form the authority, over time, the province has given conservation authorities greater autonomy to direct their own operations providing municipal representatives with a greater role in overseeing conservation authority activities.

3.4. Relationship with Other Provincial Ministries

With an investment of nearly 70 years of public funding in infrastructure, capacity, staffing, skills, resources, local knowledge, and land, in addition to local understandings and connections, conservation authorities have become attractive vehicles for delivery of other provincial initiatives at a local level.

¹² Section 30 of the Act requires each conservation authority to develop regulations on board administration. These regulations are approved by the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry.

Recent years have seen an increased role for conservation authorities, individually and collectively, in the delivery of other provincial priorities on behalf of, or in partnership with, other provincial ministries – including, but not limited to – the Ministries of Environment and Climate Change, Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, Municipal Affairs and Housing, Northern Development and Mines, Infrastructure, Education, and Tourism, Culture and Sport.

Conservation authority program relationships with other provincial ministries have grown over time and may be administered directly by individual ministries through various means (e.g. legislation, contracts, memorandums of understanding, etc.). A conservation authority's relationship with other provincial ministries is largely dependent on common interests and capacity, and on the scope of programs and services delivered by each individual conservation authority.

3.5. Relationships with Tribunals

Certain conservation authority decisions may be appealed to the Ontario Mining and Lands Commissioner (OMLC) or the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB). The OMLC and OMB are independent adjudicative tribunals that conduct hearings and make decisions on matters appealed under specific pieces of provincial legislation. In general, these tribunals are designed to resolve disputes in an informal, less costly and more timely manner than in the courts. In many instances, these tribunals seek to mediate issues first and practice alternative dispute resolution measures to expedite the resolution of matters thereby avoiding the need for a full hearing.

Decisions that have a provincial interest associated with them are referred to the OMLC. Decisions related more closely to municipal interests are referred to the OMB.

Ontario Mining and Lands Commissioner (OMLC)

Municipalities may appeal general levy apportionments to the OMLC. To date there have been only a few instances of municipalities appealing their municipal levies or levy apportionments to the OMLC. Many of these appeals are resolved without proceeding to a hearing.

A person who has been refused a permit or who objects to conditions imposed on a permit by a conservation authority may appeal permit decisions and conditions to the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry. The Minister has assigned the responsibility for hearing these appeals to the Ontario Mining & Lands Commissioner under the authority of the Ministry of Natural Resources Act.¹³

In 2013 the OMLC received seven applications under the *Conservation Authorities Act* with only one matter heard.¹⁴ The majority of cases (including permit appeals) received during 2013 were resolved in less than three months. There is no cost to filing an appeal.

¹³ *Ministry of Natural Resources Act Section 6.(4)*

¹⁴ Office of the Mining and Lands Commissioner, 2013

Ontario Municipal Board (OMB)

The OMB hears appeals by municipalities of municipal levies for special projects. Under the Act, the OMB also approves salary, expenses or allowances made to the members of the authority board of directors.

3.6. Relationship with Conservation Ontario

Conservation Ontario, formally the Association of Conservation Authorities of Ontario, is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that represents Ontario's 36 conservation authorities. On behalf of its members, Conservation Ontario builds strategic partnerships, develops programs and champions collective issues/concerns. Conservation Ontario is overseen by a General Manager and directed by a Council made up of two appointed representatives from each conservation authority that elects a six member Board of Directors from among the council members to oversee the association.

Conservation Ontario seeks to influence policy that affects conservation authorities and to provide collective services to the authorities including corporate communications, policy and program development, government relations, partnership development, research and information, evaluation and reporting, education and training, and the provision of insurance and benefits for conservation authority employees.

Conservation Ontario is funded by dues from each conservation authority supplemented by project funding and contract work.

Conservation Ontario is not established through the Conservation Authorities Act, nor is it governed by the Act. The structure, roles and responsibilities and funding of Conservation Ontario are not part of this review.

3.7. Other Accountabilities

Conservation authorities are also governed by other legislative requirements that apply to municipalities, such as the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act* and parts of the *Municipal Act*, and laws that apply to corporations and employers. Conservation authorities follow accounting standards for the public sector established by the Public Sector Accounting Board (PSAB). When reviewing permit appeals, the board of an authority reassembles as a Hearing Board under the *Statutory Powers Procedure Act*. Most conservation authorities are also registered charities under federal law and must follow rules for charitable organizations.

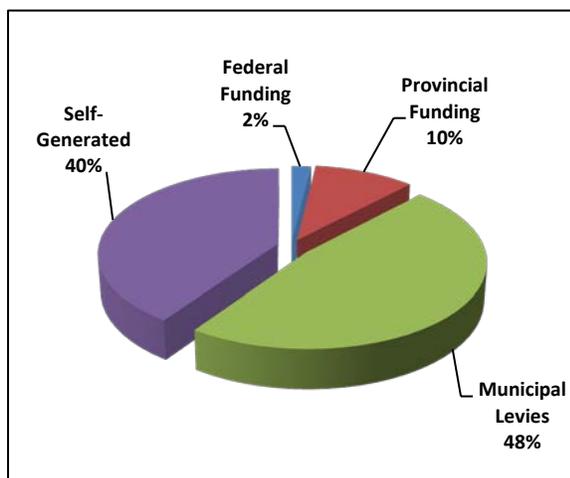
When undertaking infrastructure projects, conservation authorities are also subject to *Environmental Assessment Act* requirements. Conservation Ontario has developed a Class Environmental Assessment for Remedial Flood and Erosion Control Projects which has been approved by MOECC for conservation authorities to follow when planning remedial flood and erosion control projects.

4. Funding Mechanisms

Conservation authority revenue comes from various sources including provincial funding, municipal levies, and self-generated revenue. The total approximate annual revenue of all 36 conservation authorities in 2013 was \$305 million.¹⁵

As shown in Figure 3, in 2013, municipal levies accounted for roughly 48% of all conservation authority revenue, while self-generated revenue represented 40%, provincial funding represented 10% and federal funding represented 2%.¹⁶ Of the provincial funding provided, roughly 3% was provided by MNR for natural hazards management, while 4% was provided for Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change's source water protection program and 3% was provided for various other special projects.¹⁷

Figure 3: Total Conservation Authority Revenue Sources (2013)



The revenue sources for individual conservation authorities are highly diverse and of variable combinations. For example, in 2013 provincial funding accounted for as much as 58% of one conservation authority's annual revenue and as little as 4% for another. In the same year, self-generated revenue accounted for as much as 71% of one authority's revenue and as little as 10% for another.

Table 1 below shows the variability in conservation authority revenue, area and population. This variability means that each conservation authority has a different capacity and ability to offer a different range of programs and services.

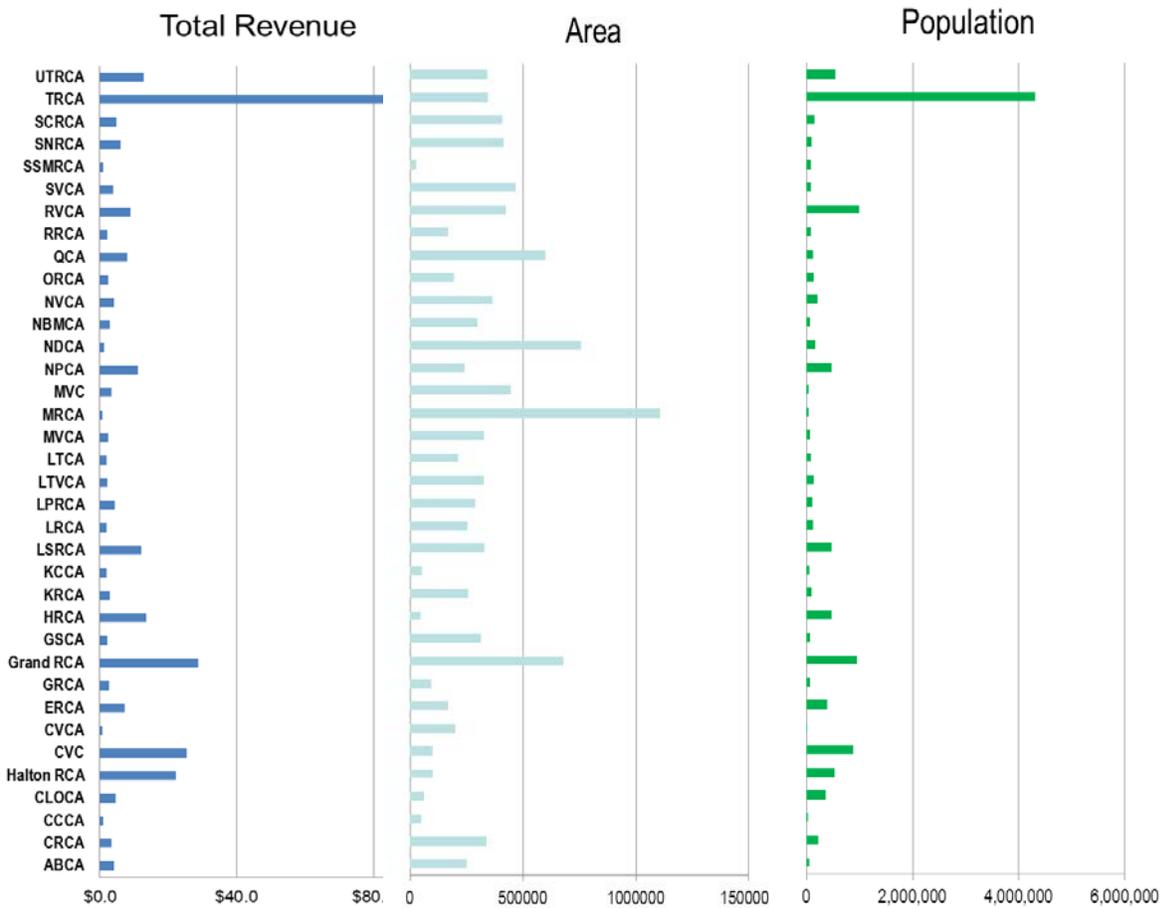
In addition to area and population, conservation authority funding needs vary depending on watershed characteristics such as the amount of hazard land and the potential for flooding, drought, etc. and the number and purpose of water and erosion control structures owned and or operated by the authority.

¹⁵ As reported by conservation authorities through annual statistics collected by Conservation Ontario

¹⁶ As reported by conservation authorities through annual statistics collected by Conservation Ontario

¹⁷ source protection funding will be shifting to a steady state

Table 1: Diversity of Conservation Authorities' Revenue, Area and Population¹⁸



Under the Act, conservation authorities are required to have an annual financial audit with the auditor’s report provided to participating municipalities and the MNRF. In terms of expenditures, conservation authorities report spending, in total, roughly 43% on water management, 42% of revenue on land management, 12% on administration and 3% on communications.¹⁹ However, expenditures from one conservation authority to another may vary significantly.

4.1. Municipal Levies

The Conservation Authorities Act enables conservation authorities to levy the cost of board-approved programs and services against their participating municipalities. In 2013, participating municipalities provided over \$140 million to conservation authorities through municipal levies.

The levy process is complex. First, a conservation authority budget is established and approved by the board. A portion of the budget is paid for with provincial, federal or self-generated revenue, and the rest

¹⁸ Revenues shown in Millions of Dollars, Area shown in Hectares, Population shown in Millions

¹⁹ As reported by conservation authorities through annual statistics collected by Conservation Ontario

is paid by participating municipalities through municipal levies. The total municipal levy amount is divided up among the participating municipalities according to the benefit each one receives from the authority's services, which is determined in different ways for different types of levies. Levies can be categorized as being for maintenance and administration costs, or for capital and project costs.

For most conservation authorities, the majority of the municipal levy amount is for maintenance and administration costs. These costs represent the administrative and operational funding provided to conservation authorities and is divided among all the municipalities according to a formula set out in regulation.²⁰ This formula is based on the total value of property within each municipality within an authority's jurisdiction so that municipalities with high land values pay more than those with low land values. The total land value is also modified according to the type of property, so that urban property types such as commercial, industrial and multi-residential are worth more than rural property types like residential, forest or farmland. Conservation authorities and municipalities can also agree on a different method of dividing these costs as an alternative to using the land value formula.²¹ How costs are divided (the 'apportionment') can be appealed by a participating municipality to the Ontario Mining and Lands Commissioner.

Capital and project costs may be levied only against certain municipalities who will benefit from the project. The conservation authority determines how these costs are divided. This apportionment can be appealed by municipalities to the Ontario Municipal Board.

Additional rules under Ontario Regulation 139/96 (Municipal Levies) also apply to any levies for costs that are not shared with the Province. These additional rules include weighted voting: each municipality gets the same percentage of the vote on the levy as the percentage of the total municipal levy that it pays.

4.2. Self-Generated Revenue

Conservation authorities can also generate their own revenue through various means including:

- earned revenues on a 'cost recovery' basis (contracts, fees for service, permits (campsites, entrance fees) related to conservation areas);
- earned income on a 'for profit' basis (rentals, sales, sales of land, resource development such as logging, hydroelectric production);
- commercial/industrial sector partnerships including businesses (gift shops) and joint contracts for resource development (generating hydro-electric power etc.); and
- private sector funding from individuals, corporations and foundations (fundraising, gifts, donations, sponsorships etc.).

In most cases, self-generated revenue may be used at the discretion of the authority board for any board-approved conservation authority program.²² Additional rules apply to the use of revenue generated through the disposition of conservation authority property.²³ In 2013, self-generated revenue accounted for over \$120 million in conservation authority revenue.

²⁰ As set out in Ontario Regulation 670/00 (Conservation Authority Levies)

²¹ *Ontario Regulation 670/00 Section 2.(1)(a)*

²² *Policies and Procedures for the Treatment of Conservation Authority Generated Revenue*

²³ *Policies and Procedures for the Disposition of Conservation Authority Property*

Fees for Service

Subsection 21(m.1) of the Act gives conservation authorities the power to charge fees for services. The Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry determines which services conservation authorities may charge fees for. The Minister has given conservation authorities approval to charge fees for permitting services, plan reviews, extension services (e.g. technical advice/ implementation of erosion control measures, technical studies etc.), education services (e.g., tours, presentations, workshops etc.), and any service under other legislation authorized under agreement with the lead ministry.²⁴

The MNRF's policies and procedures require each conservation authority to have a fees policy in place which includes a fee schedule, a process for public notification about the establishment of or any proposed changes to fee schedules, a clearly defined review and revision process, and a process for appeals for fees that are proposed or in place.²⁵

For planning, and compliance-oriented activities such as regulatory or permitting services, the fee structures should be designed to recover but not exceed the costs associated with administering and delivering the services on a program basis.²⁶

While the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry approves the services which conservation authorities may charge fees for, fee amounts are set by individual conservation authorities. Costs vary from authority to authority for the provision of certain services so therefore the fee structures of conservation authorities may vary from one conservation authority to another. Through MNRF policy, conservation authorities are encouraged to review neighbouring conservation authorities' fee structures when developing or updating their own structure.²⁷

Fundraising

Most conservation authorities also receive funding from individuals, corporations and foundations through fundraising, gifts, donations and sponsorship. Additionally, conservation authorities provide many opportunities for in-kind donations to the organization such as volunteer services.

4.3. Provincial Funding

Conservation authorities receive and may apply for funding from the province to support provincially-mandated activities and local projects.

The province provides conservation authorities with funding for provincially mandated programs – including the hazards management program funded by MNRF and the source water protection program funded by MOECC.

The MNRF's hazard management program is funded through two separate transfer payments.

²⁴ *Policies and Procedures for the Charging of Conservation Authority Fees (1997) – Section 5.1*

²⁵ *Policies and Procedures for the Charging of Conservation Authority Fees (1997) Section 5.2*

²⁶ *Policies and Procedures for the Charging of Conservation Authority Fees (1997) Section 5.3*

²⁷ *Policies and Procedures for the Charging of Conservation Authority Fees (1997) Section 5.5*

Since 2000, MNRF has provided over \$7 million in Section 39 transfer payments annually to conservation authorities to support the approved programs in natural hazard management and public safety. The provincial funds support flood and erosion control operations and maintenance, flood forecasting and warning, ice management, and the authorities' review of Official Plans and Plan Amendments for consistency with natural hazard policies of the Provincial Policy Statement (2014), natural hazards technical studies and administration.

The amount each conservation authority receives from MNRF is a fixed amount based on an average of 1990's operational costs and must be matched by municipal contributions through municipal levies. The MNRF amount provided to each conservation authority was reduced from \$7.6 million annually to \$7.4 million annually in 2011.

Additional funding for natural hazard management is also provided to conservation authorities through MNRF's Water and Erosion Control Infrastructure (WECI) transfer payment program. Since 2003, MNRF has provided conservation authorities with \$5 million annually in capital funding (with a temporary two year reduction to \$2.5M from 2012-14) to invest in major repairs and studies of existing conservation authority-owned or operated water and erosion control infrastructure. This project funding supports conservation authorities in ensuring the safe operation and maintenance of their dams and water control infrastructure. These funds are matched by participating municipalities involved, for an annual investment in water and erosion control infrastructure of \$10 million. The WECI funding program is an application-based program that funds the highest priority projects each year.

Conservations authorities may also receive funding from other federal departments and provincial agencies through transfer payments to implement programs or projects related to other government priorities established under other pieces of legislation.

For example, the Province (through MNRF and MOECC) has provided over \$220 million since 2004 in funding to conservation authorities to fulfill their duties as Source Protection Authorities under the *Clean Water Act*. Funding was used for capacity building, technical studies, and water budgets, and supported source protection committees and authorities in developing the province's first science-based source protection plans for local watersheds. Future levels of funding are expected to move to a steady state once current source protection plans are approved.

Additional funding may be provided to conservations authorities in support of special projects on a project by project or application basis. For example, conservation authorities may receive funding for projects from both the provincial and federal government under the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health funding program.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

The objects of a conservation authority, under the *Conservation Authorities Act*, are to establish and undertake a program to further the conservation, restoration, development and management of natural resources other than gas, oil, coal and minerals. The Act defines the potential scope of programs and services which may be delivered by a conservation authority within its area of jurisdiction. The scope of potential programs is intentionally broad, providing each individual conservation authority with flexibility to develop local resource management programs which are tailored to meet local geography, needs and priorities.

Current roles and responsibilities for conservation authorities fall under the five broad headings outlined below.

5.1. Local Resource Management Agency

The *Conservation Authorities Act* provides conservation authorities with the authority to develop local resource management programs or projects that suit local needs and geography. The scope afforded to projects in the Act under S. 20 is broad – anything to “further the conservation, restoration, development and management of natural resources other than gas, oil, coal and minerals.” The scale of the authority projects and programs is determined at the local level, decided on by the board.

Conservation Area Statistics

73,645 hectares of conservation areas

including

2,491 kilometers of trails

and

8,442 campsites

accessed by

6,898,229 annual visitors

including

430,764 students

**As reported by conservation authorities*

Collectively through their local programs, conservation authorities play an important role in resource management and environmental protection through stewardship, conservation land acquisition and management, recreation, education, and science and research. These programs may include tree planting, habitat rehabilitation and restoration, water quality improvement and water supply management, ground water monitoring, education and outreach, heritage conservation, management of conservation areas, information management, data collection and mapping, monitoring and the development of technical studies, watershed plans and the development of natural heritage strategies. Every conservation authority board-approved local resource management program is unique, offering a different suite of programs designed to reflect local needs and priorities. Conservation authority local programs are often supported by community volunteers. In 2012 over 37,000 people volunteered to support more than

700 local conservation authority projects.²⁸

Conservation authorities also have a role in local resource management as land owners. Conservation authorities have accumulated large land holdings within their jurisdictions through property acquisition, eco-gifting and land conveyances. Conservation authority owned land is considered private land under the *Planning Act*. Some of these lands are operated by the authorities for educational and recreational purposes, for conservation or protection reasons and also for income generation. Conservation authorities may develop their lands to support local programs, or may maintain lands in a natural state in order to protect them and provide ecological and natural hazard management benefits to the public. Conservation authorities may also act as interested parties on development applications near their landholdings. In addition, because of their proximity to watercourses, conservation authorities own or control lands that have a high concentration of cultural heritage resources.

Board-approved local resource management programs may be funded by municipal levies, self-generated revenue, or through a contract with another organization. In areas of the province where conservation authorities have not been established, local resource management programs may be developed and administered directly by municipalities.

5.2. MNRF Approved Projects under the Act

Section 24 of the Act requires conservation authorities to obtain MNRF approval for projects that are funded by MNRF through the Act. The project that the Minister currently approves under the Act for all conservation authorities is related to public safety and natural hazard management. The increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events associated with climate change has further underscored the importance of this role in protecting persons and property from water-related natural hazards including flooding and drought.

All conservation authorities implement a shared provincial/ municipal program in public safety and natural hazard management. As part of their role in implementing the shared provincial/ municipal program in public safety and natural hazard management, conservation authorities own and or operate over 900 flood control structures including 256 dams, and numerous engineered channels, dykes and erosion control works. Under this shared provincial/ municipal program, conservation authorities also undertake flood forecasting and warning and ice management. To support these and other programs (e.g. hazard input into municipal planning), conservation authorities may also collect and prepare technical data related to natural hazards in their jurisdiction.

As part of the MNRF natural hazard program, the MNRF has delegated to conservation authorities the responsibility for representing the "Provincial Interest" for natural hazard policies (s.3.1) of the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) (2014) under the *Planning Act* through a Memorandum of Understanding between the MNRF, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) and Conservation Ontario. This delegation does not occur under the *Conservation Authorities Act*. Conservation authorities are to comment on municipal planning policy and site plan applications submitted as part of the [Provincial One-Window Plan Review Service](#) to ensure consistency with the natural hazard policies of the PPS (2014). Where MMAH is not the approval authority conservation authorities still perform this role under the Municipal Plan Review. Conservation authority comments

²⁸ As reported by conservation authorities through annual statistics collected by Conservation Ontario

are to be made based on MNRF's *Natural Hazard Technical Guides* (2002) which were developed to support the PPS policies. When undertaking this role conservation authorities are guided by *Planning Act* definitions (e.g. for development, hazardous sites, etc.) and not by definitions under the *Conservation Authorities Act*.

The natural hazard program is funded by the MNRF through provincial grants and transfer payments, and cost shared with municipalities. In areas of the province without conservation authorities natural hazards are managed by municipalities under the natural hazard policies of the PPS and flood forecasting and warning responsibilities are undertaken by MNRF.

5.3. Regulatory Authority

Each conservation authority has a provincially-approved 'Development, Interference with Wetlands and Alterations to Shorelines and Watercourses' regulation developed under section 28 of the *Conservation Authorities Act*. Conservation authorities are responsible for regulating development within the regulatory limits described within their respective regulations. In areas of the province without conservation authorities development in hazardous areas is managed by municipalities under the natural hazard policies of the PPS. Conservation authorities' regulatory role is primarily funded through the use of permitting fees and municipal levies.

Under these regulations, conservation authorities are responsible for regulating development and other activities through a permitting process for purposes of natural hazard management. Regulated activities are:

- Development in areas related to water-related natural hazards such as floodplains, shorelines, wetlands and hazardous lands.²⁹ Under the Act, conservation authorities must consider development applications based on potential impacts to the control of water-related natural hazards which includes flooding, erosion, dynamic beaches, pollution or the conservation of land; and,
- Interference with or alterations to a watercourse or wetland.

In order to implement the approved regulation, the authority board sets regulatory policies and practices.

The *Conservation Authorities Act* regulation authority was expanded through Act amendments in 1998, and enacted through the 'generic' regulation approved by the province in 2004 and updated individual regulations approved by the Minister in 2006. The updated regulations require conservation authorities to regulate additional water related hazards such as unstable soils and bedrock, erosion and dynamic beaches. MNRF technical support for the regulations is provided through the *Guidelines for Developing Schedules of Regulated Areas* (2005) and the MNRF *Natural Hazards Technical Guides* (2002) developed for the PPS natural hazard policies.

Under the Act, a person who has been refused a permit or who objects to conditions imposed on a permit by a conservation authority may appeal permit decisions and conditions to the Minister of

²⁹ Hazardous lands is defined in the *Conservation Authorities Act* under S.28 (25) as land that could be unsafe for development because of naturally occurring processes associated with flooding, erosion, dynamic beaches or unstable soil or bedrock

Natural Resources and Forestry. The Minister has assigned the responsibility for hearing these appeals to the Ontario Mining & Lands Commissioner.

In 2010, MNRF released the [*Policies & Procedures for Conservation Authority Plan Review & Permitting Activities*](#) - a new policy for conservation authorities to clarify and provide best practices for their roles under the *Planning Act* and in the municipal planning process and in their regulatory authority under the *Conservation Authorities Act*. This policy was developed with the assistance of a multi-ministry, multi-stakeholder committee (the Conservation Authorities Liaison Committee) co-chaired by the MNRF and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and was made up of representatives from the building industry, municipalities, conservation authorities and environmental organizations.

5.4. Roles under Other Provincial Legislation

Conservation authorities may be assigned responsibilities under other pieces of provincial legislation. For example, under the *Clean Water Act*, conservation authorities were assigned the duties and responsibilities of source protection authorities. In addition, the *Lake Simcoe Protection Act* assigns the local conservation authority – the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority – a key role in implementing the policies in the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan in collaboration with the province, municipalities and others.

In many of these other legislative roles, conservation authorities are a commenting agency and are required to receive notice of proposals made under other pieces of legislation including the *Planning Act*, the *Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act*, the *Environmental Assessment Act* and the *Aggregates Resources Act*. In these roles, conservation authorities base any comments on board-approved policies that the authority has developed as a local resource management agency. Under the *Planning Act* as a public body and local board, conservation authorities can comment on and appeal municipal planning documents on a range of other PPS policies as directed by conservation authority board-approved policy. This more general PPS policy commenting role is distinct from the MNRF delegated commenting role related specifically to the PPS natural hazards policies.

5.5. Service Providers

Under the Act, every authority is a corporation, and as such has the inherent capacity to undertake responsibilities requiring an incorporated organization to accomplish. With an investment of nearly 70 years of public funding in infrastructure, capacity, staffing, skills, resources, local knowledge, connections in resource manage, and common interests, these organizations are attractive vehicles for delivery of initiatives of others whether by agreement or through a contract.

Conservation authorities may enter into agreements with others as may be necessary to carry out a project. As a result conservation authorities may have service agreements or contracts with federal and provincial government agencies and partnering municipalities or others (e.g. school boards, public health units, etc.) to perform a variety of services or tasks.

Some conservation authorities may have roles and responsibilities related to joint federal/ provincial interests such as supporting Environment Canada in implementing the Canada-United States Great

Lakes Water Quality Agreement and working with federal and provincial agencies as well as local groups to restore community waterfronts and Great Lakes “Areas of Concern.” Some conservation authorities may be undertaking projects funded under the Canada-Ontario Agreement on Great Lakes Water Quality and Ecosystem Health.

Some conservation authorities provide additional technical services to municipalities through service agreements. Types of services could include data collection and scientific expertise related to natural resource management, stormwater management, identifying natural heritage features and systems on behalf of their municipalities, and or reviewing natural heritage evaluations in support of municipal assessment of *Planning Act* applications or environmental assessments. Under an agreement with a municipality, an authority may assume a regulatory responsibility such as administering municipal tree cutting bylaws or septic system approvals or undertake technical reviews pursuant to the *Planning Act* [One Window Plan Review Service](#) on parts of planning policy or site plan applications.



6. Summary and Questions for Discussion

The following questions are intended to help focus the discussion. They are organized around the areas of review outlined in Section 1:

1. *Governance* – the processes, structures, and accountability frameworks within the Act which direct conservation authority decision-making and operations;
2. *Funding* – the mechanisms put in place by the Act to fund conservation authorities; and
3. *Roles and Responsibilities* – the roles and associated responsibilities that the Act enables conservation authorities to undertake.

The questions are general in nature and intended to prompt discussion on a number of focused areas and are not intended to discourage readers from raising questions or providing comments in other areas. Where possible, please provide specific examples and/ or links to supporting information.

6.1. Governance

Conservation authorities are governed by the *Conservation Authorities Act* and by a board of directors appointed by the municipalities that form the authority. The province, through the Act, defines the objectives to be pursued by the authority and the power granted to the authority to achieve these objectives. The activities undertaken by conservation authorities in the pursuit of their objectives are directed by a municipally appointed board of directors. Municipal representatives to conservation authority boards are directly accountable to the municipalities that appoint them and conservation authorities must abide by provincial legislative, regulatory and policy requirements.

In the past, the province played a more direct role in overseeing conservation authorities. The province directed conservation authorities by approving their budgets and programs, appointing provincial representatives to authority boards, selecting the chair of the board and, when requested by the authority, by appointing provincial field officers to direct and coordinate the authority's work. The provincial government was involved in approving projects and activities, and monitoring and reviewing conservation authority programs. While oversight of conservation authorities is still shared between the province and the municipalities that form the authorities, changes to the Act, policy and general practice over time have resulted in less direct provincial oversight. These changes have provided conservation authorities with greater autonomy to direct their own operations and have given municipal representatives who comprise the authority board a greater role in deciding and overseeing authority activities. It has also afforded conservation authority staff greater freedom to make proposals for programming and research for the board's collective review. Because decisions are made collectively by all the participating municipalities in an authority through the board, the amount of control each municipality has over conservation authority decisions varies.

At the same time, conservation authorities are developing new, and enhancing existing, relationships with other provincial ministries and other partners. In some cases, these relationships are managed

through other legislative frameworks, such as through the *Clean Water Act* and the *Lake Simcoe Protection Act*. In other cases these relationships are managed on a project-by-project or authority-by-authority basis by a contract or MOU. There are no processes, standards or tools within the *Conservation Authorities Act* or supporting framework governing these relationships.

It is difficult to generalize or to speak about a generic conservation authority as the result of the Act has been to enable a great diversity of organizations in scale and operations and capacity, with variance in resourcing or funding and funding strategies, board structures and the level of direct accountability to and interest of municipalities varies.

QUESTION #1: *In your view, how well is the current governance model as provided in the Conservation Authorities Act working?*

- a. What aspects of the current governance model are working well?
- b. What aspects of the current governance model are in need of improvement?
- c. In terms of governance, what should be expected of:
 - a. The board and its members?
 - b. The general manager or chief administrative officer?
 - c. Municipalities?
 - d. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry?
 - e. Other provincial ministries?
 - f. Others?
- d. How should the responsibility for oversight of conservation authorities be shared between the province and municipalities?
- e. Are there other governance practices or tools that could be used to enhance the existing governance model?

6.2. Funding Mechanisms

The Conservation Authorities Act establishes a number of mechanisms which conservation authorities can use to fund their activities. The Act allows the MNRF to provide conservation authorities with funding to support Ministry approved programs. As a corporate body, conservation authorities may also receive or apply for funding from the province to deliver programs on its behalf. Local resource management programs and services can be funded through municipal levies and conservation authorities can self-generate revenue through service and user fees, resource development and fundraising.

Conservation authority revenue across Ontario's 36 conservation authorities is as varied as the programs and services offered by each authority. While the province provides all conservation authorities with funding towards approved natural hazards activities, the ability of each conservation authority to deliver other programs and services largely depends on the ability of each authority to

locally fund programs and services. Conservation authorities with large populations within their jurisdictions generally have a greater tax base to draw from, as well as more opportunities for self-generated revenue, so they can offer more programs and services at a lower per capita cost.

In addition, conservation authority funding needs vary depending on the size of their respective jurisdictions, population levels, watershed characteristics (such as the amount of hazard land and the potential for flood, drought, etc.) and the number and purpose of water and erosion control structures owned and/ or operated by the conservation authority.

QUESTION #2: *In your view, how are the programs and services delivered by conservation authorities best financed?*

- a. How well are the existing funding mechanisms outlined within the Act working?
- b. What changes to existing funding mechanisms would you like to see if any?
- c. Which funding mechanisms, or combination of funding mechanisms, are best able to support the long term sustainability of conservation authorities?
- d. Are there other revenue generation tools that should be considered?

6.3. Roles and Responsibilities

The *Conservation Authorities Act* enables conservation authorities to undertake a wide range of activities on behalf of provincial, municipal and other interests through several roles. These roles have been enabled through the Act, and the responsibilities have followed. Conservation authorities are the only resource management agencies in Ontario that are organized on a watershed basis.

The Act provides conservation authorities with the power to develop their own suite of programs and services tailored to the capacity and expertise of each individual authority and the local needs and interests they serve. This flexibility allows conservation authorities, and the municipalities that fund them, to focus their resources on areas of greatest need to the local population. It also results in variability in the scale and range of programs and services delivered by any individual conservation authority. Some conservation authorities offer a basic program primarily focused on stewardship, conservation land acquisition and management, recreation, education, and science and research. Other conservation authorities may offer the same programming at a much broader scale and complexity in addition to a wider range of programs that can include, for example, promotion of green infrastructure, development of strategies such as natural heritage strategies, land acquisitions strategies, and extensive watershed and water management planning. Some conservation authorities invest in resource development initiatives such as hydroelectric generation, large scale waterfront developments in lake fills, and income generation projects such as marina operation, cottage rentals and ski hills.

Recent years have seen an increased interest in reviewing conservation authority roles in resource management in Ontario. The Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Service in particular called on the province to undertake a review of the programs and services delivered by both the MNR and conservation authorities to clarify responsibilities and eliminate any duplication. Other concerns have been raised regarding the lack of clarity in the scope of conservation authority roles and responsibilities especially in relation to municipalities and the province. Specifically questions have been raised

regarding conservation authorities' regulatory role and the intention of the regulations, with some key regulatory terms undefined in legislation (e.g. conservation of land and interference with a wetland).

QUESTION #3: *In your view, what should be the role of conservation authorities in Ontario?*

- a. What resource management programs and activities may be best delivered at the watershed scale?
- b. Are current roles and responsibilities authorized by the *Conservation Authorities Act* appropriate? Why or why not? What changes, if any, would you like to see?
- c. How may the impacts of climate change affect the programs and activities delivered by conservation authorities? Are conservation authorities equipped to deal with these effects?
- d. Is the variability in conservation authorities' capacity and resourcing to offer a range of programs and services a concern? Should there be a standard program for all authorities to deliver? Why or why not?
- e. What are some of the challenges facing conservation authorities in balancing their various roles and responsibilities? Are there tools or other changes that would help with this?
- f. Are there opportunities to improve consistency in service standards, timelines and fee structures? What are the means by which consistency can be improved? What are some of the challenges in achieving greater consistency in these areas?

6.4. Other Areas of Interest

Broad input is critically important to ensure that a range of perspectives, opinions and ideas are collected. While we encourage respondents to focus on the discussion questions provided above we welcome feedback on additional areas.

QUESTION #4: *Are there any other areas, questions or concerns regarding the Conservation Authorities Act or conservation authorities in general that you feel should be considered as part of the review?*

7. How to Provide Input

We want to hear from you. If you have comments or suggestions that should be considered in the review of the *Conservation Authorities Act*, please take advantage of this opportunity to provide us with your feedback. All comments received in response to this discussion paper will be read and considered in moving forward.

Send us your comments

We strongly encourage your participation in the discussion. Written comments can be provided by:

Responding to the Environmental Bill of Rights Registry posting by searching the EBR Registry number 012-4509 on the following website: www.ontario.ca/EBR

Or

Emailing us at:
mnrwaterpolicy@ontario.ca

Or

Submitting answers to the questions outlined in this paper through:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/caactdiscussionpaper>

The deadline for providing comments is October 19th, 2015

Comments collected in response to this discussion paper will be used to inform decisions regarding whether or not to pursue changes to Ontario's existing legislative, regulatory and policy framework for conservation authorities. The review of individual conservation authorities, the specific programs and services they deliver, and site-specific permit applications and permitting decisions are not within scope of the Ministry's review.

All Ontarians are encouraged to learn more about Ontario's conservation authorities and the important role that they play in resource management and environmental protection.

To find out more about conservation authorities and the programs and services they provide please visit:

<https://www.ontario.ca/environment-and-energy/conservation-authorities>

To locate your local conservation authority please visit:

<http://www.conservation-ontario.on.ca/about-us/conservation-authorities/ca-contact-list>



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Appendices

List of Conservation Authorities

Conservation Authority	Acronym*
Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority	ABCA
Cataraqui Region Conservation Authority	CRCA
Catfish Creek Conservation Authority	CCCA
Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority	CLOCA
Credit Valley Conservation Authority	CVC
Crowe Valley Conservation Authority	CVCA
Essex Region Conservation Authority	ERCA
Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority	GRCA
Grand River Conservation Authority	Grand RCA
Grey Sauble Conservation Authority	GSCA
Halton Region Conservation Authority	Halton RCA
Hamilton Region Conservation Authority	HRCA
Kawartha Region Conservation Authority	KRCA
Kettle Creek Conservation Authority	KCCA
Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority	LSRCA
Lakehead Region Conservation Authority	LRCA
Long Point Region Conservation Authority	LPRCA
Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority	LTVCA
Lower Trent Region Conservation Authority	LTCA
Maitland Valley Conservation Authority	MVCA
Mattagami Region Conservation Authority	MRCA
Mississippi Valley Conservation Authority	MVC
Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority	NPCA
Nickel District Conservation Authority	NDCA
North Bay-Mattawa Conservation Authority	NBMCA
Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority	NVCA
Otonabee Region Conservation Authority	ORCA
Quinte Conservation Authority	QCA
Raisin Region Conservation Authority	RRCA
Rideau Valley Conservation Authority	RVCA
Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority	SVCA
Sault Ste. Marie Region Conservation Authority	SSMRCA
South Nation River Conservation Authority	SNRCA
St. Clair Region Conservation Authority	SCRCA
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority	TRCA
Upper Thames River Conservation Authority	UTRCA

*As used within this Discussion Paper

List of Conservation Authority Regulations

Conservation authority activities are guided by a series of regulations established under the Act.

Section 27 (2) O. Reg. 670/00 Conservation Authority Levies Regulation. Outlines means for determining apportionment by the conservation authority of the levy payable by a participating municipality for maintenance costs on the basis of the benefit derived each municipality, either by agreement or using ‘modified current value assessment’ under the Assessment Act.

Section 27 (3) O. Reg. 139/96 Municipal Levies Regulation. LGIC regulation that outlines how ‘non-matching’ municipal levies are decided with a ‘weighted’ vote at a conservation authority board Meeting convened to do so.

Section 28 (6) O. Reg. 97/04 - Content of Conservation Authority Regulations under subsection 28 (1) of the Act Development, Interference with Wetlands and Alterations to Shorelines and Watercourses. Lieutenant Governor in Council regulation governing the content of regulations made by authorities including flood event standards and other standards that may be used, and setting out what must be included or excluded from regulations made by the authorities and approved by the Minister.

Section 28 O. Regs. 42/06, 146/06-182/06, 319/09, – Development, Interference with Wetlands and Alterations to Shorelines and Watercourses Regulation. Regulation enables conservation authorities to regulate development in areas prone to water-based natural hazards (i.e. shorelines, floodplains, wetlands) for impacts to the control of the water-based hazards (i.e. flooding and erosion) or for changing or ‘interfering’ with a watercourse or wetland for purposes of public safety and natural hazard prevention and management.

Section 29 O. Regs. 98/90 -136/90 – Conservation Areas Regulation. Discretionary regulation applies to conservation areas owned & operated by the conservation authority, outlines prohibited activities or activities requiring a permit and rules of use (i.e. control of animals, vehicles, with provisions for enforcement).

Section 30 “Mandatory Regulations”- All conservation authorities were required to make regulations outlining administration functions of the board. Originally Minister approved, these regulations are now ‘by-laws’ which can be amended without Minister approval if amendments conform to the approved generic template provided to conservation authorities in 1985.

Section 40 Regulations. The province may make regulations defining any term that is used in the *Conservation Authorities Act* and that is not defined in the Act. This regulation making authority has not yet been used.

