



Conservation Ontario Submission to the Walkerton Inquiry

Public Hearings #2 & #3

Conservation Ontario, on behalf of all conservation authorities and specifically in partnership with Saugeen Conservation and the Grand River Conservation Authority, respectfully submits this paper in response to the Agenda outlined for Public Hearings #2 and #3. This paper addresses only those agenda items for which Conservation Ontario has expertise and perspectives.

Conservation Ontario Recommendations regarding Provincial Government:

a. Overall Policy and Standards

It is recommended that:

An integrated provincial water policy framework be developed that recognizes all aspects of surface and ground water and promotes the principle of integrated resource management on a watershed basis. The policy framework should provide direction for the protection of water resources; ensure balance among environmental, economic and social needs; and, encourage partnerships in water stewardship.

An integrated provincial water policy framework should guide the consolidation and streamlining of existing legislation, policies and guidelines into a comprehensive format. This process will help identify current conflicting and/or competing policies. The water policy should define the vision, goals, objectives and guiding principles of the provincial government regarding water and address the current fragmentation of management responsibilities through legislative and administrative means.

The policy framework should support a collaborative, interagency, inter-disciplinary approach to water management that promotes a multi-barrier approach for water protection. The vision and implementation responsibilities arising from the policy framework should be shared by all departments within government and other related jurisdictions and interests.

Specifically with respect to source water protection and watershed management, the provincial water policy framework should:

- Clarify the role of the provincial government in water management.
- Recognize the principle of watershed management and deal with all aspects of water.
- Recognize the principle that source protection is a component of watershed management and is the first step in a multi-barrier approach to protecting drinking water.
- Build upon the conservation authority model to advance watershed management.
- Establish mechanisms to provide adequate and sustainable sources of funding.
- Establish standards for the protection of surface and ground water for all uses, including drinking water sources.
- Set performance standards and mechanisms to ensure accountability.
- Include conflict resolution mechanisms with respect to water use and allocation.
- Promote research into water issues and development of decision support tools to ensure the best science, technology and management practices are shared and available for local application.
- Support an adequate monitoring program to measure change and adapt policies and programs accordingly (i.e., adaptive environmental management).
- Support the improvement, maintenance and accessibility of resource data for effective local watershed management.
- Support effective implementation of watershed management and source protection through land use planning, regulation, land stewardship, and land securement.

b. Approvals/Licensing

It is recommended that:

Approval and licensing systems conform to the integrated provincial water policy framework and, where appropriate (e.g. permits to take water, certificates of approval for water and wastewater projects), be guided by the watershed management plan.

Site specific decisions need to take into account both the overall goals and objectives as set out in provincial policy and the local watershed conditions and constraints as identified by the watershed management plan in order to ensure sustainability of the water resource.

Conservation Ontario Recommendations Regarding Relationship to Other Public Institutions

a. Overall Coordination Role of Provincial Government

It is recommended that:

The Province define a lead Minister and Ministry for water and undertake the development and implementation of an integrated water policy framework.

Right now we have a patchwork of laws, regulations and fragmented jurisdictions governing the management of surface and ground water. Fractured responsibilities for water quality and quantity are impeding the proper management of water resources at the local level. Ontario needs to identify the lead for water within one Ministry if these outstanding issues are to be corrected. The lead Ministry should coordinate the development of an integrated provincial water policy framework outlining a vision and implementation responsibilities that are shared by all departments within government and other related jurisdictions and interests.

Regardless of how the provincial government structures itself, conservation authorities have extensive experience/expertise in watershed management and could deliver significant components of the water agenda with their municipal partners.

b. Relationship to Conservation Authorities

It is recommended that:

The Province recommit to its partnership with conservation authorities and recognize conservation authorities, through their partnership with municipalities, as the watershed delivery agents for the integrated provincial water policy framework.

Conservation authorities are the only agency in Ontario structured on a watershed basis, and therefore are well-positioned to take the lead in watershed management.

Conservation authorities deliver watershed management programs to:

- Improve water quality;
- Reduce flood damages;
- Provide an adequate water supply;
- Protect natural areas and biodiversity; and,
- Provide environmental education.

Conservation authorities also provide recreational opportunities through:

- operation of active conservation areas; and,
- providing lands and trails for passive recreational use.

Conservation authorities are, by definition, a long-standing partnership between the Province of Ontario and municipalities for the management of water and natural resources on a watershed basis. Currently, conservation authority's governing board is comprised of representatives named by the municipal councils in the watershed. There are 38 conservation authorities in Ontario serving over 90% of Ontario's population.

Conservation authorities provide a local delivery mechanism for federal, provincial and municipal initiatives and priorities (e.g. Dept. of Fisheries and Oceans Fish Habitat Regulations, Remedial Action Plans, Provincial Groundwater Monitoring Network, Rural Water Quality Programs).

The development and implementation of watershed management plans offers an effective mechanism for the local delivery of provincial legislation and policy. Provincial water management objectives can be integrated with other environmental, social, and economic objectives, on a watershed basis, and implementation programs tailored to meet the specific needs of the watershed and its stakeholders.

Conservation authorities have co-ordinated and delivered effective on-the-ground programs for over 50 years. Two recent surveys conducted by the Environics Research Group found that 82% of rural landowners consider conservation authorities to be one of the most credible/trusted source of information on land management. As well, 48% of respondents believe that conservation authorities, of all conservation organizations in Ontario, should set environmental priorities for private lands in given areas.

It is recommended that:

The Province support capacity-building of conservation authorities and provide tools that enable them to effectively implement the integrated provincial water policy framework at the watershed level.

Conservation authorities provide a strong base on which to build effective watershed management in the populated parts of this province. To strengthen Conservation authorities' ability to carry out watershed management and protect long-term drinking water supplies the Province should adopt an integrated provincial water policy framework (see Overall Policy and Standards) and develop tools such as:

- Mechanisms for sustainable funding to provide a base level of watershed management (resources and expertise)
- Performance standards and protocols to ensure accountability
- Decision support tools (e.g. water budget modelling)
- Monitoring networks necessary to support watershed management