

November 23, 2022

Public Input Coordinator
MNR – PD – Resources Planning and Development Policy Branch
300 Water Street, 2nd Floor, South tower
Peterborough, ON K9J 3C7

Re: Proposed Updates to the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System (ERO 019-6160)

On behalf of the City of Toronto, I am pleased to submit staff comments regarding ERO 019-6160 on the Environmental Registry of Ontario. We understand the Province is seeking feedback on proposed updates to the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System (OWES) as presented by the Province in support of Ontario's Housing Supply Action Plan 3.0.

Collectively we share the Provincial objective within the Housing Action Plan that would create more housing for a broad spectrum of Torontonians. We commend the Province for its bold vision and goal to make it easier and faster to build new homes for Ontarians as part of its commitment to build 1.5 million homes over the next ten years, of which 285,000 homes (or 19%) are targeted for Toronto. However, we believe the proposed changes to OWES may escalate and accelerate the impacts felt through the dual crisis of climate change and biodiversity loss.

City of Toronto staff have concerns about the proposed updates to OWES and the potential reduction in protection for significant wetlands and their functions across the City and throughout southern Ontario. In particular we do not support the following proposed changes (as outlined in Attachment 1):

- the removal of wetland complexes as a criteria for the identification of Provincially Significant Wetlands;
- the removal of Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR) oversight and expertise from the evaluation and classification of Provincially Significant Wetlands;
- the removal of Conservation Authority's ability to provide their expertise through technical advice related to impacts of development to Provincially Significant Wetlands; and
- the removal of Endangered and Threatened Species as criteria to evaluate wetland significance.

Value of Wetlands

At a global scale, we are in a climate and biodiversity crisis. Wetlands play a key role in mitigating the impacts of climate change, increasing community resilience to environmental stressors, and provides habitat for native species. Wetlands lie at the interface of terrestrial and

aquatic habitats, which makes wetlands amongst "the most dynamic, biologically diverse and productive ecosystems on the planet" ([Ontario Biodiversity Council \(OBC\), 2021](#)). Wetlands provide a wide range of ecosystem services that directly benefit the surrounding communities including shoreline stabilization, water purification, groundwater recharge and discharge, and flood control (OBC, 2021).

Provincially Significant Wetlands in Toronto

Over the last three centuries, the landscape of Toronto, and southern Ontario more broadly, has seen a dramatic decline in wetland cover. The Toronto area in particular has lost more than 85% of original pre-settlement wetlands (OBC, 2021).

The City of Toronto has 10 Provincially Significant Wetlands, identified by the Province. This includes the addition of two new Provincially Significant Wetlands through Official Plan Amendment 583, which was adopted by City Council on June 15, 2022 and submitted to the Province for approval. The City's Provincially Significant Wetlands are identified on the updated Map 12B to ensure conformity with policy 2.1.4 of the Provincial Policy Statement, 2020. This is re-enforced by Official Plan policy 3.4.15 concerning protection for Provincially significant natural heritage features, including wetlands (note: this policy will be updated to 3.4.16 through OPA 583).

All 10 of the City's Provincially Significant Wetlands are identified by experienced evaluators as wetland complexes. A wetland complex includes a series of functionally connected wetland areas. This can include wetland areas less than 2ha, which would otherwise not be large enough to qualify as a Provincially Significant Wetland on their own. While the vast majority of these wetland complexes are designated as either Natural Areas or Parks in the City of Toronto's Official Plan (Maps 13-23), there are functionally connected areas that exist beyond those designations. The proposed changes outlined in ERO 019-6160 could result in the loss of the wetland's function, through a reduction in their current level of protection.

"In Toronto, wildlife dependent on wetlands include animals that rely on wetlands for their entire life cycle: fish, certain highly aquatic amphibians, reptiles and mammals such as mudpuppies, northern map turtles and muskrats. Other amphibians that rely on both wetland and upland habitat such as toads and leopard frogs, which only require wetlands for short, but critical, periods each year, can be found in Toronto wetlands. In the City of Toronto, wetlands provide the only habitat for some waterfowl, heron and songbird species. Wooded wetlands also provide some of the only habitat for area-sensitive species of birds within the City, where swamps (wooded wetlands) form large mosaics with slope forests and remaining table land forests. In the Toronto area, wetlands also teem with upland-dependent, generalist bird species, which range widely between wetlands and other habitats during their life cycle." (North-South Environmental Inc., 2009)

Wetlands are well accepted as fundamental in building effective natural heritage systems for the maintenance of ecological integrity at a landscape level. The designation of provincially significant wetlands is one of the cornerstones of provincial policies to protect Natural Heritage Systems in many areas of the province (ibid).

City Planning staff always welcome the opportunity to work with provincial staff to effectively implement the provincial policy led planning system, drawing on each of our strengths to protect essential ecological features and create sustainable, healthy complete communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments.



Gregg Lintern, MCIP, RPP
Chief Planner and Executive Director
City Planning Division

cc: Janie Romoff, General Manager, Parks, Forestry & Recreation, City of Toronto
Lou Di Gironimo, General Manager, Toronto Water, City of Toronto
Tracey Cook, Interim City Manager, City Manager Services, City of Toronto

Attachments

Attachment 1: Staff's detailed comments related to ERO 019-6160

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ERO 019-6160 Proposed Revision	Issue	Staff Comments
<p>Removes references to "wetland complexes" as a criteria for the identification of Provincially Significant Wetlands.</p>	<p>This change would jeopardize the function of all of the City's 10 Provincially Significant Wetlands (PSWs), as all are identified as Wetland Complexes.</p> <p>The current proposal would allow for the re-evaluation of single wetland units, without requiring a complete re-evaluation of all units within a wetland complexe. This could result in the loss of important habitat and hydrologic function to the broader wetland system.</p> <p>Wetland complexes are currently identified as being related to one another in a functional way (i.e. as a group they tend to have similar or complementary biological, social and/or hydrological functions). Wildlife and local biodiversity rely on the entire complex of wetlands throughout their life cycle.</p> <p>This change would significantly reduce the protection for many previously identified PSWs across Southern Ontario.</p>	<p>Do not support the elimination of wetland complexes from the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System.</p>
<p>Removes Provincial oversight and expertise from the evaluation and re-evaluation of Provincially Significant Wetlands.</p>	<p>The MNR currently plays an important land use planning function to ensure proper identification and protection of Provincially Significant Wetlands. This loss of oversight may result in a decrease in existing wetland cover in Southern Ontario.</p> <p>The proposed changes do not identify an approval process for wetland evaluation, re-evaluation, or delineation. Wetland evaluations (and re-evaluations) would be "approved" once a certified wetland evaluator submits an evaluation to the municipality. This would remove the science-based principle of peer review and iterative application review process under the <i>Planning Act</i>.</p>	<p>Do not support the removal of Provincial oversight of identification or re-evaluation of Provincially Significant Wetlands.</p> <p>The MNR holds valuable expertise in the identification and protection of wetlands in Toronto and throughout Southern Ontario. The removal of this expertise and decision making oversight could result in previously evaluated PSWs from being de-listed once a certified wetland evaluator completes their evaluation.</p>

<p>Removes Conservation Authority expertise from the identifying the impacts of development to Provincially Significant Wetlands.</p>	<p>The proposal also includes the removal of the Conservation Authority's use of PSW information in their implementing of the <i>Conservation Authorities Act</i>, and their role in watershed planning and providing technical advice (at the request of municipalities).</p> <p>The City relies on TRCA's science-based technical expertise to assist with the identification, review, and protection of wetlands. The proposed changes would download responsibilities in evaluating their significance to the City, without additional funding or supports.</p>	<p>Do not support the removal of the role of Conservation Authorities from using PSW evaluation in developing watershed plans or to provide technical advice to the City.</p> <p>The TRCA holds valuable expertise in the protection of wetlands in Toronto and their region. The removal of this expertise could result in a further loss of wetlands on the landscape and a reduction of their ecological and hydrological function.</p>
<p>Removes references to Endangered and Threatened Species as a criteria to evaluate a wetland's significance.</p>	<p>In the evaluation of a wetland, the species present and biodiversity is an important consideration. The proposal includes a deletion of reference to listed species at risk in Ontario. This means that the inclusion of the habitat (or observation) of either a listed Endangered or Threatened Species would not influence the scoring of a wetland to being Provincially Significant or not.</p>	<p>Do not support the removal of reference to Habitat for an Endangered or Threatened Species under Section 4.0 Special Features Component.</p>