



Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs
Pre-Budget Consultation: The Value of Tree Planting

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Recommendation for Spring 2020 Provincial Budget

Given the significant economic, social, and environmental values provided through afforestation as well as the growing public support around tree planting, it is recommended that the provincial government's upcoming budget allocate \$2.5 million towards Forests Ontario's 50 Million Tree Program, leveraging funding from the federal government and other financial supporters to create new forests.

Forests Ontario

Forests Ontario is a not-for-profit charity dedicated to re-greening the province through the support of forest restoration, stewardship, education, and awareness. Acting as the voice of our forests, the organization promotes Canada's greatest natural resource, our forests, and the ability of healthy forests to sustain healthy communities and healthy economies.

Forests Ontario was first formed in 2014 through the merging of the Ontario Forestry Association and Trees Ontario. Today, Forests Ontario is the leading charity organization for the delivery of high-quality, large-scale tree planting programs across Canada, facilitating the planting of more 33 million trees.

Due to the proven ability of forests to mitigate climate change and associated impacts, Forests Ontario believes that it is more imperative now than ever to enhance and increase provincial forest cover.

The 50 Million Tree Program

Forests Ontario's flagship afforestation program is the 50 Million Tree Program (50 MTP). The 50 MTP was introduced in 2007 in order to enable Ontario to contribute to global efforts in addressing climate change. The goal of the program was to plant 50 million trees by 2025.

The program incentivizes large-scale planting of new forests¹ by providing property owners with financial and technical assistance to increase forest cover on their land. As of June 2019, Forests Ontario and its partners have planted more than 29 million trees and created over 16,000 hectares of new forest through the 50 MTP; these plantings are estimated to sequester more than 22,000 tonnes of carbon each year.

The long-term nature of the commitments made under the 50 MTP has both required and enabled Forests Ontario and its partners to build capacity and invest in the infrastructure necessary for the delivery of high-quality tree planting. For example, nurseries have invested in growing stock for the program three to four years in advance of it being planted and planting partners have built their landowner inventory around the program's objective of long-term planning.

¹ Planting new forests, or *afforestation*, is the establishment of forests in areas that have not had tree cover for several decades. *Reforestation* is the replacing of forests that have been recently harvested. Ontario's forest industry, as part of their legal obligations, reforest approximately 68 million trees each year on areas that have been recently harvested.

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Value of the 50 Million Tree Program

In February of 2019, a report titled *The Economic Value of Tree Planting in Southern Ontario* was released; this report outlined the economic impact of the 50 MTP and quantified the ecosystem services provided by the program's plantings. The highlights included:

- For every dollar the Government of Ontario invested in the program, three dollars of economic impact were generated
- The 50 MTP annual tree plant contributes approximately \$12.7 million to the Canadian GDP each year
- More than 300 full time, seasonal jobs are supported by the 50 MTP
- \$82.7 million in ecosystem services are estimated to be generated by the 50 MTP annually
 - Ecosystem services provided by the program's plantings include aesthetic/amenity value, gas regulation, habitat refugium/biodiversity, nutrient and waste regulation, cultural, pollination and dispersal, recreation, and water supply regulation.

However, despite proven benefits, on April 12, 2019 the Government of Ontario announced the cancellation of funding for the 50 MTP as part of their efforts to address the provincial deficit.

Public Outcry Over Cancellation

The degree of public outcry over the cancellation of the 50 MTP was extreme. In the span of the four weeks following the announcement, Forests Ontario responded to over 400 media requests, including television, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

An online petition to save the 50 MTP was started by Windsor-resident Sambath Kumaar; this petition garnered 99,450 signatures from across the province. It should be noted that the highest level of response to the petition was in the Belleville area (Figure 1).

On June 5, 2019 – World Environment Day – the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, the Honourable Catherine McKenna, announced that the Government of Canada would be contributing up to \$15 million dollars over four years in support of the 50 MTP.

This support has allowed Forests Ontario to maintain the tree planting infrastructure and build upon the momentum that had been developed over the span of the program.

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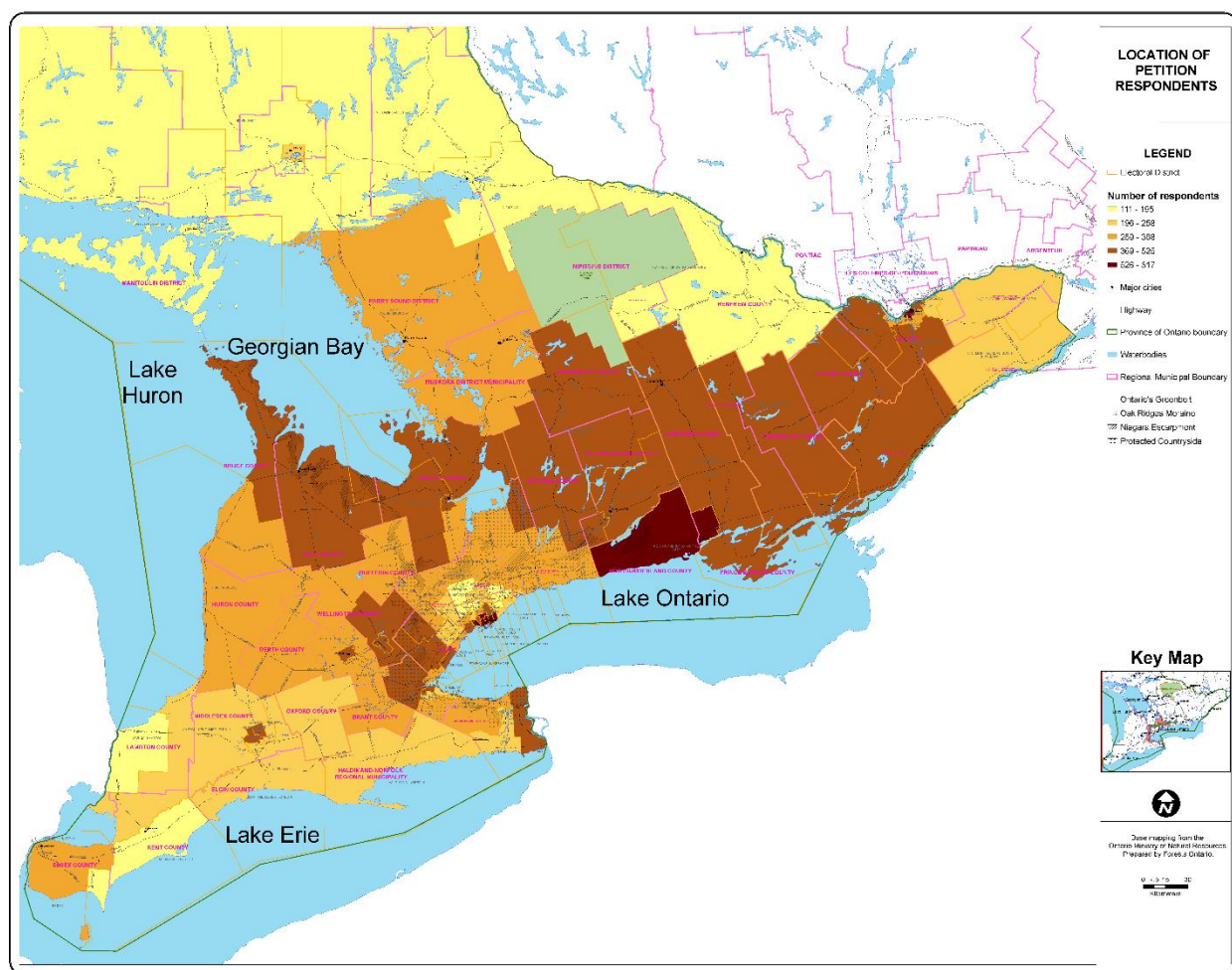


Figure 2. Map of the locations of respondents to the petition to rescind the cancellation of the 50 Million Tree Program.

New Opportunities for the Provincial Government to Re-engage with Tree Planting

The positive public sentiment around tree planting continues to grow. Around the globe, world leaders are making significant national commitments regarding tree planting out of recognition of the relatively inexpensive contribution new healthy forests make towards combatting climate change. For example, the UK is working towards its target of planting 1.5 billion trees by 2050, Jamaica has just recently committed to planting three million trees in the next three years, and Germany has pledged \$878 million to restore its woodlands. Internationally, the Bonn Challenge was launched in 2011 by Germany and the IUCN with the global goal of restoring 150 million hectares of forest by 2020 and 350 million hectares by 2030.

These intentions are echoed in Canada. During the 2019 federal election, both the Liberal and Green parties made commitments to plant trees: two billion over ten years and ten billion over 30 years, respectively. Upon winning the election, the Liberal Party is now following up with their tree planting commitment and developing the program(s) needed to achieve their target.

Canada's national commitment creates an opportunity for the Government of Ontario to re-engage with tree planting through the contribution of a portion of the previously offered financial support.

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Current Program Support

Since the cancellation of provincial funding of the 50 MTP in April of 2019, the funding structure of the program has significantly changed. It should be noted that, as per the Honourable Minister John Yakabuski's recommendation, Forests Ontario has been actively pursuing, and successfully securing, corporate support for its tree planting program(s).

Currently, the funding for the program comes from a combination of federal, corporate, foundation, and donor support. Over time, Forests Ontario has experienced an increase in contributions from non-government sources, such as the generous donation of \$100,000 from Canopy Growth which was coordinated by Ministers Steve Clark and John Yakabuski.

It is anticipated that with the federal government's commitment to plant two billion trees by 2030, more funding will be allocated to the 50 MTP. Now more than ever, the 50 MTP presents an effective, efficient, and highly visible mechanism for supporters to contribute to efforts to increase forest cover, mitigate climate change, and meet (or even exceed) climate and/or sustainability goals.

By leveraging the efforts of all involved parties, there is ample opportunity for the provincial government to engage in and contribute to tree planting at a much-reduced cost, thereby maintaining deficit reduction while also contributing to climate action.

It is recommended that the provincial government's spring budget allocate \$2.5 million towards the 50 MTP, to be leveraged against federal and other funding sources. Further, it is recommended that when the federal government tables its programs and budgets, the province match the contributions set for Ontario.

Conclusion

It is well-known that increasing tree cover is environmentally, economically, and socially beneficial. It has also been accepted that tree planting *can* and *will* play a pivotal role in mitigating climate change. Further, as demonstrated, there is widespread recognition among Ontarians that climate action through tree planting is not only attainable, but necessary.

By supporting tree planting in the upcoming budget, the Government of Ontario would be sending a strong, positive message to Ontarians that climate action is a key priority. By selecting Forests Ontario as the primary tree planting organization, the provincial government would be supporting Canada's most reputable afforestation experts.

Forests Ontario welcomes all to join them in the fight against climate change by participating in the 50 MTP. By increasing forest cover (and all of the associated benefits), the 50 MTP allows all levels of supporters and partners to make meaningful contributions to climate action and become environmental leaders on a global stage.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Value of Increasing Forest Cover

Planting trees and increasing canopy cover is incredibly environmentally, economically, and socially valuable. The various benefits realized through tree planting are experienced across the province, improving the quality of life of all Ontarians.

From an environmental perspective, trees provide an impressive suite of environmental services. They filter pollutants to improve air quality; reduce flooding and stabilize banks to enhance water quality; act as protection from eroding forces to maintain soil health; create wildlife habitat, support species diversity, and facilitate in pollination; and regulate water supply, gas, nutrients, and waste.

Our forests are incredibly economically important; they support 170,000 jobs in Ontario as well as the communities in which those jobs are centered, provide a steady supply of the products we rely upon daily, generate revenue through tourism and recreation, and can increase agricultural profitability by reducing soil erosion. Further, nearby trees can reduce a building's heating and cooling costs and significantly increase property value.

Trees also play a foundational role in supporting human health. Primarily, trees provide oxygen; one acre of forest is estimated to provide the oxygen required by 18 people for an entire year. Additionally, the presence of local trees has been linked to lower rates of respiratory illness and marked improvements in cognitive function. The intrinsic aesthetic value of trees as well as the recreational opportunities they provide positively impact human physical and mental wellbeing. Further, as Canadians, trees have been, and continue to be, a cornerstone of our cultural legacy.

However, increasingly more important is the role trees play in mitigating climate change and its associated impacts. It is well-known that through photosynthesis, trees absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen, effectively sequestering carbon; in this way, trees are one of the only mechanisms we have to actually *remove* existing carbon from the atmosphere. In addition, trees also address many of the impacts associated with climate change, as they provide cooling effects in the face of extreme heat and reduce the impacts of flooding which come with more frequent and intense precipitation events. These climate benefits reach across environmental, economic, and social spheres.

It should be noted that each of the above-mentioned benefits are maximized by the presence of large, healthy, diverse, and contiguous forests on the landscape. According to Environment Canada's How Much Habitat is Enough, 40% forest cover on a watershed scale is required for our forests to maintain their resiliency and health; in some parts of Ontario, forest cover is as low as 5%.

Tree Planting Infrastructure

Through the 50 MTP, Forests Ontario and its partners have developed the comprehensive and complex infrastructure necessary for a successful afforestation program. This infrastructure enables the entirety of the tree planting process, from seed to survival, and benefits not only Forests Ontario's 50 MTP but *all* provincial tree planting programs and organizations.

Unbeknownst to many, afforestation is far more complex than simply digging a hole and planting a tree; rather, it involves numerous steps, which Forests Ontario alone has developed the infrastructure to support:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. *Seed Forecasting, Collection and Processing*

To ensure successful planting, native seed sourced stock must be matched to the site. This comes down to using quality seed derived from coordinated seed forecasting, collection, and processing.

The proper management of seed is increasingly essential as climate change progresses and as species ranges shift. In response, Forests Ontario has developed a seed sourcing web application and seed management database.

2. *Stock Development*

Once the source identified seed has been acquired, source-identified stock can be grown.

To ensure program success, a three-year forecast for stock quantity and species is required; this means that nursery partners must have their stock in the ground three years prior to when it will be planted under the 50 MTP. In some cases, five years of stock development is required in advance of planting. For this reason, it is imperative to have long-term, secure program funding.

3. *Site Planning and Preparation*

Forests Ontario has a network of over 80 dedicated planting partners and delivery agents across the province who meet with landowners, visit their land, prepare site plans, and undertake necessary preparation to ensure a successful planting.

These partners include conservation authorities, stewardship groups, forestry consultants, and municipalities.

4. *Planting*

Forests Ontario's planting partners and delivery agents take into consideration landowner objectives and site characteristics, planting only the best-suited, native species to ensure maximal survival. Trees are planted predominantly using tractors and machines, however, in many cases hand planting is necessary in tougher terrain or when underplanting.

With the help of these partners, Forests Ontario has engaged with more than 5,000 landowners to plant over 13,000 different sites under the 50 MTP.

5. *Post-Plant Survival Assessment*

Following planting, our partners conduct survival assessments one, two, and five years after planting. When necessary, infill will be completed.

Forests Ontario's 50 MTP boasts an average survival rate of 75%.

6. *Data Collection and Analysis*

Forests Ontario stays accountable through a state-of-the-art online reporting system that collects data on seed sources, planting sites, and survival rates. This level of accountability is unmatched and allows for continual adaptation and improvement.