

To the Standing Committee On Finance and Economic Affairs,

Conservation Authorities are more important than ever to support resilient communities in the current climate change crisis. The inclusion of Schedules 6 and 8 in Bill 229 will set back integrated watershed management and forest protections by decades. On behalf of the Stratford chapter of the Canadian Federation of University Women we are demanding that these schedules be removed. Further, we ask that the Ontario government immediately seek to ensure that the current mandate of the province's 36 conservation authorities is not only maintained but enhanced, in order to effectively protect, restore and manage the watersheds at this unprecedented time when government climate leadership is sorely needed.

It is now widely recognized that climate change and biodiversity are interconnected. Biodiversity is affected by climate change, with negative consequences for human well-being, but biodiversity, through the ecosystem services it supports, also makes an important contribution to both climate-change mitigation and adaptation. Consequently, conserving and sustainably managing biodiversity is critical to addressing climate change.

Conservation Authorities fill this crucial role with their mandate :

- to ensure that Ontario's rivers, lakes and streams are properly safeguarded, managed and restored;
- to protect, manage and restore Ontario's woodlands, wetlands and natural habitat;
- to develop and maintain programs that will protect life and property from natural hazards such as flooding and erosion;
- to provide opportunities for the public to enjoy, learn from and respect Ontario's natural resources

In addition to climate change, other challenges facing Ontario's Conservation Authorities have never been greater. For example, the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority watershed's location in a highly developed part of southern Ontario results in pressures from urban and rural land uses. The water quality of the Thames and its tributaries is impacted by drainage practices, rural and urban runoff, spills, and bank alterations, among other activities. Much of the forest cover in the watershed has been cleared for agricultural fields or urban development. The forests have also been affected by invasive species and over-water management.

Despite these pressures, the Thames remains one of the most biologically diverse rivers in Canada. The river is home to over 90 species of fish and many Species At Risk including the spiny softshell turtle and the queen snake. The entire Thames River system (including tributaries) has been designated a Canadian Heritage River based on its rich cultural heritage and diverse recreational opportunities.

We believe that a disempowered Conservation Authority will not be able to continue this work and meet the increasing challenges of the immediate future.

Conservation Authorities must have the necessary regulatory power, appropriate staffing and adequate funding to intervene in planning decisions and development applications. Their vital role in land use planning and permitting must be retained to ensure that development does not put communities at risk from flooding and other climate change impacts through loss of wetlands, woodlands and farmland.

CFUW policies have recently included one in which we urge provinces and the corporate sector to implement climate action plans, based on science and social justice, that work urgently to mitigate factors creating the climate crisis; and also to prepare for the unavoidable consequences such as floods, storms, fires, water insecurity, and so on. One of the effects of Schedule 6 will be to change the basis of decisions from science (conservation scientists making the final decisions) to those made by non-scientists (mandatory municipal members who possibly may have short term development priorities).

Also, Schedule 8 would prevent the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks from ever issuing a species protection order or habitat protection order for any forest operations conducted as per the exemption from the Endangered Species Act. That legislation has already been watered down by including what critics have rightly dubbed a “pay-to-slay” provision for developers.

Not only is the content of these two schedules unacceptable, but the way in which it has been done is repellent to all democracy-minded citizens. We are cognizant that adding legislative changes to budget bills is designed to avoid proper scrutiny, debate and public consultation (as in the over-use of Ministerial Zoning Orders).

A unique aspect of Ontario's Conservation Authorities is that they were organized within watershed boundaries, instead of municipal ones. Yes, they were integrated with municipalities in many effective ways, but this fact alone speaks to the prime importance placed on the land and waters by the Conservation Authorities . Land and waters that the people of Ontario rely on for their intrinsic value, in a time of shrinking nature, biodiversity and climate threats. Schedules 6 and 8 are conduits for destruction of that value, an irreplaceable loss. Once again, we demand their removal.

respectfully,

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