

March 18, 2026

Sent via email: minister.mecp@ontario.ca

The Honorable Todd McCarthy
Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks
College Park 5th Floor
777 Bay Street
Toronto ON, M7A 2J3

Subject: Proposed boundaries for the regional consolidation of Ontario's Conservation Authorities

On March 10, 2026, the Province posted a decision on Environmental Registry of Ontario (ERO No. [025-1257](#)) regarding the "Proposed boundaries for the regional consolidation of Ontario's conservation authorities". The current 35 Conservation Authorities (CAs) will be consolidated into eight Regional CAs (RCAs), by way of statutory amalgamation, to occur in early 2027, or a later date prescribed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council (LGIC). Lakehead Region CA with its current jurisdiction, will be renamed as the Northwestern Ontario Regional Conservation Authority, for a total of 9 regional CAs. This plan will be led by the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency.

The following comments are provided in response to a Motion passed unanimously by the Essex Region Source Protection Committee (SPC) on March 11, 2026 (Resolution No. SPC 11/26):

THAT the Essex Region Source Protection Committee provide a letter to the Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks in response to the Province's announcement that 36 Conservation Authorities be amalgamated to nine regional conservation authorities reflecting their concerns that the Clean Water Act has not been adequately considered and further;

THAT the letter be copied to all local MPPs, municipalities, the Source Protection Authority and all other appropriate bodies.

Moved by: Ron Barrette

Seconded by: Bill Dukes. **Carried.**

Delineation of Source Protection Areas

The Essex Region Source Protection Committee (SPC) is tasked with protecting sources of drinking water in the Essex Region through the execution of the *Clean Water Act*, 2006 and its Regulations. Members are appointed to the SPC by the Source Protection Authority under O.Reg 288/07. The Conservation Authority (CA) exercises and performs the powers and duties of a drinking water source protection authority (CWA, s.4(2)) for the Source Protection Area, where that area is defined as the area over which a CA has jurisdiction under the *Conservation Authorities Act* (CWA, s.4(1)).

Source Protection Areas and Regions are described under O.Reg 284/07, where the Essex Region is identified as a stand-alone Source Protection Area. The neighbouring Thames-Sydenham and Region Source Protection Region consists of the Lower Thames Valley, Upper Thames River and St. Clair Region CAs, with Upper Thames identified as the lead Source Protection Authority. Importantly, Source Protection Regions and Areas are defined by watersheds and were established through consultation and negotiation.

A watershed is a hydrologic unit wherein an area of land drains to a single point or outlet to a larger body of water. The Walkerton Inquiry Report states that watershed or sub-watershed scale is appropriate for the delivery of source water protection, using the CA boundaries as they are currently defined. Specifically, in section 4.3.2 Source Protection Plans, Recommendation 1 (p. 95), Justice O'Connor wrote:

"For this recommendation, I suggest that the provincial government accept the watersheds as they are currently defined for the purposes of establishing the jurisdiction of the conservation authorities. These jurisdictions have the advantage of already being in place, and they have worked well in the past. There has been no serious suggestion that watersheds should be reidentified for the purpose of the planning process I am recommending. Below, I recommend that where possible, the conservation authorities coordinate the development of watershed-based source protection plans. It therefore makes sense to adopt the jurisdictional areas within which the conservation authorities now operate for the purposes of source protection planning."

The Essex Region was selected to be a stand-alone region because as a peninsula, it is surrounded by water on three sides with more than 20 hydrologically distinct watersheds draining to Lake St. Clair, the Detroit River or the western basin of Lake Erie. Further, it shares no hydrological connection on the land to the Thames River, our nearest, and only, neighbouring watershed. Our region also faces challenges from flat, low-lying terrain, dense impermeable clay soils, rapid runoff response, aggressive shoreline erosion, and extensive agricultural land use, including a rapidly expanding greenhouse sector. Our drinking water is drawn exclusively from the Great Lakes and connecting channels with unique challenges from international waters. All seven of our intakes are affected to varying degrees by harmful algal blooms which create a toxin identified as a drinking water issue. These are significantly different challenges than those faced by our neighbours, and the Essex Region SPC and its support staff have the expertise and relationships to manage these unique threats to our sources of drinking water.

Should the proposal to amalgamate CAs come into force without simultaneous significant changes to the CWA, as per s.4(1) of the CWA, the Source Protection Area boundaries will presumably match the newly defined Regional Conservation Authority boundaries, with those Boards acting as the Source Protection Authority, thus eliminating the Essex Region Source Protection Authority and its Source Protection Committee. Local input and expertise are essential to success of source water protection – the people responsible for writing policies and assessing progress are from the region, intimately aware of its unique landscape, and consume the very water they strive to protect. They understand their community's needs and how best to balance those needs with the need to protect its sources of drinking water. Barring significant changes to the *Clean Water Act*, which will require extensive consultation, our Committee is deeply concerned about the potential loss of local protection of our sources of drinking water. The Province has stated that the new RCAs would

continue to have a role in source water protection, however, the Province has neither acknowledged that the delivery of source water protection will be drastically affected by this decision, nor has it recognized that this decision backtracks on implementation of one of Justice O'Connors key recommendations from the Walkerton Inquiry Report.

Meaningful Consultation

Despite the integral role that Source Protection Committees and Authorities play in protecting our drinking water, we were not meaningfully consulted at any point regarding the decision to amalgamate Conservation Authorities. In our response to ERO No. 025-1257, we provided a scientifically and legislatively defensible compromise solution that any consolidation of CAs should not result in areas larger than the currently defined Source Protection Areas and Regions. This would ensure the seamless delivery of locally directed source water protection and would result in a minimum of 19 Regional Conservation Authorities, not nine. We do not feel that our concerns have been addressed by the posted decision.

Summary

In closing, the Essex Region SPC is supportive of ideas that will improve efficiency and facilitate collaboration; however, we have great concerns about the current proposal as we have outlined above. We feel strongly that Source Water Protection must remain local, as indicated by Justice O'Connor in his recommendations following the Walkerton Inquiry. This then dictates that the boundaries of any new Regional Conservation Authority should not exceed SPR/A boundaries as they are based on Justice O'Connor's recommendations to prevent another tragedy from occurring.

Therefore, we recommend:

- That the current geographic scale of SPA and SPRs be retained, including local Source Protection Committees
- That the current extent of the Source Protection Regions and Areas be considered the *largest possible geographic extent* for any new Regional Conservation Authorities
- That any new RCA boundaries be watershed based at the appropriate scale for management
- That any change to CA boundaries or amalgamation of CAs occur only after extensive consultation with the affected CAs and their communities

Further, we recommend that the implementation of the posted decision be paused until actual meaningful consultation has taken place with all rightsholders and stakeholders, including Source Protection Committees and Authorities.

Sincerely,



Tim Mousseau, Acting Chair, Essex Region Source Protection Committee

CC: Essex Region Source Protection Authority
Municipality of Lakeshore
Town of Tecumseh
City of Windsor

Town of LaSalle
Town of Amherstburg
Town of Essex
Town of Kingsville
Municipality of Leamington
Township of Pelee
County of Essex
Andrew Dowie, MPP (Windsor-Tecumseh)
Anthony Leardi, MPP (Essex)
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