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Greenbelt Foundation

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GREENBELT FOUNDATION BACKGROUNDER

Southern Ontario Nature Coalition

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Overview

The importance of nature and biodiversity to communities and the future was made clear in the Government of Canada's historic announcements to conserve 25 per cent of Canada's lands, freshwater, and oceans by 2025, working toward 30 per cent by 2030; and to plant two billion trees in the same timeframe. Ontario and all provinces and territories recognize the importance of retaining landscape connectivity and conserving resilient habitats and ecosystems, while ensuring growing populations have healthy access to greenspace and the many ecosystem services that nature provides.

Continued urban growth when met with the climate crisis will make more Canadians vulnerable to flooding, heat waves, droughts, and other stresses that affect everything from infrastructure to food production systems and local economies. Near-urban natural areas are both at-risk from climate change and necessary for protecting communities from its impacts. In order to adapt, we must find new strategies that specifically target the protection of near-urban natural areas.

That is why Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), as well as the Government of Ontario, have supported the Greenbelt Foundation in convening partners in the Southern Ontario Nature Coalition (SONC) to identify practical solutions to protect near-urban nature in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH). These solutions can also be applied across the country. Meeting this challenge begins with awareness of nature's benefits. Indigenous histories and Knowledge Systems can inform strategies and advance management of the lands, water, and wildlife in the region.

Why is Near-Urban Nature So Important?

The Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) is Canada's most urbanized and rapidly developing region. According to projections, the region is set to be home to 15 million residents by 2051. These residents require accessible greenspace and healthy ecosystems to sustain them. Access to greenspace is proven to have positive impacts on physical and mental health, while healthy ecosystems provide resilience to climate change for nearby communities. At present, near-urban nature in the GGH provides an estimated \$3.2 billion worth of "ecosystem services," such as preventing flooding and keeping residents and property safe, moderating hot summer temperatures, protecting freshwater resources, and more.

Nature in the GGH is some of Canada's most biodiverse, with the region's Carolinian Ecozone containing plants and animals otherwise rare in Canada. This region also contains more species-at-risk than



anywhere else in Ontario. Protecting nature in the GGH and in similar near-urban regions across southern Canada is a challenge, given multiple jurisdictions, competing visions for the use of lands, and highly fragmented ownership. Doing so requires a coordinated, multi-jurisdictional approach that convenes multiple municipal governments, conservation authorities, private and public landowners, Indigenous Communities and Peoples, and other important stakeholders. While challenging, this effort is imperative to ensuring near-urban nature can continue to sustain life in Canada's most developed regions.

Southern Ontario Nature Coalition

The Southern Ontario Nature Coalition (SONC) is a group of experienced provincial, regional, and community-based conservation organizations, land-based policy experts, and Indigenous consultants. Convened by the Greenbelt Foundation and with support from the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario, SONC is developing a strategy that supports a robust near-urban nature network for the Greater Golden Horseshoe. What we learn in southern Ontario will inform, inspire, and connect urban landscapes across the country. Ultimately, our work today is critical to the resilience and prosperity of the Canadian communities of tomorrow. The Coalition is committed to engaging First Nations Peoples and communities in accordance with community protocols and the development of ethical space for all to contribute meaningfully.

Near-Urban Nature Network

With the dual crises of biodiversity and climate change looming, the cost of inaction is too great. Canada's support for the *Near-Urban Nature Network* is a crucial step forward in protecting near-urban nature across the country, conserving biodiversity, supporting Indigenous Communities in caring for the land and waters, and creating greater climate resilience for our urban communities.

With funding support, the Coalition can deliver on short-term actions to support a Near Urban Nature Network in the Greater Golden Horseshoe region.

Key Actions Include:

1. Continue to engage interested local Indigenous Communities in accordance with community protocols and the development of ethical space.
2. Communicate the vision and importance of the Near Urban Nature Network for Canada and southern Ontario and build on the model of the Greenbelt and findings of this project, including continuing in-depth assessments of areas of importance for protecting, connecting, and restoring land for:
 - a. Ecology—Key Biodiversity Areas and areas of local significance, and areas integral to regional connectivity;
 - b. Culture—Indigenous biocultural mapping; *and*
 - c. Society—Communities vulnerable to climate change impacts.
3. Support outreach and engagement activities and the development of tools and resources to accelerate opportunities to establish protected and conserved areas in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe, including Other Environmental Conservation Measures (OECMs) and Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs).



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4. Contribute towards Canada achieving its targets of conserving 25 per cent of lands, freshwater, and oceans by 2025 and working toward 30 per cent by 2030.
5. Identify opportunities for regional planning to improve access to greenspace for residents.
6. Lead significant ecosystem restoration actions in the region and investments in natural infrastructure by:
 - a. Partnering with the Government of Canada in implementing the “Growing Canada’s Forests Program,” which will plant two billion trees by 2030, including strategic planning and collaboration to identify priorities and monitoring needs; *and*
 - b. Developing tools and resources to increase biodiversity and climate resilience stewardship outcomes among agricultural and private landowners, including Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Certification and promoting woodlot economies.
7. Launch a Native Plant Seed Strategy Pilot for seed zones associated with the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), and in collaboration with Indigenous Communities.
8. Continue pan-Canadian conversations to advance the protection of nature and people’s connection to nature, in urban areas.

SONC Final and Technical Reports

The Final and Technical Reports contain key recommendations for government and other stakeholders, which can help Canada do more to protect near-urban nature, restore biodiversity, and become more climate-resilient. These recommendations stem from work the Southern Ontario Nature Coalition has done to date in developing the Near-Urban Nature Network in southern Ontario. The report findings will be useful to similar regions across Canada where the protection of near-urban nature is also of paramount importance.

Some Key Recommendations from the Reports

All Governments

1. **Centre nature-based solutions in all climate adaptation planning** at all levels of government including the federal government’s upcoming Climate Change Adaptation Plan and any adaptation planning resulting from Ontario’s current Climate Change Impact Assessment.

Federal Government

2. **Provide funding to Indigenous Peoples** so that they have greater capacity to participate in near-urban nature protection and exercise their responsibility to care for the land and waters and continue cultural traditions and ways of life.
3. **Develop national guidance and standards** to designate important ecological corridors and priority regions, such as the Greenbelt and Greater Golden Horseshoe, based on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s guidelines for conserving connectivity through



ecological networks and corridors, and the Canadian Council on Ecological Areas' recommendations in Implementing connectivity Conservation in Canada.

4. Provide funding to support the development of a **national native seed strategy**, similar to the U.S. National Seed Strategy.
5. Provide **dedicated funding and support** for near-urban tree planting through the two billion trees commitment, including support for building capacity to grow more native trees.

Government of Ontario

6. **Strengthen regulatory and policy protections for** all Provincial Wildlife Areas, Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest and Provincially Significant Wetlands on unceded (Crown) land, for example through designation under the Public Lands Act so that these areas to meet Canada's Target 1 criteria.
7. **Protect agricultural land** from development by encouraging and funding the use of easements, soil health, and strategic restoration on agricultural lands. Invest in **local stewardship programs** with objectives that support connected and restored landscapes in near-urban areas. Improve **property tax incentives** by streamlining administration and reducing costs in the operation of the Conservation Land Tax Incentive Program and the Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program that supports land trusts' protected areas.

Municipalities, Conservation Authorities, and Organizations

8. Municipalities, conservation authorities and organizations, Indigenous Communities, and all levels of government should work together to coordinate efforts toward achieving a target of at least 30 per cent forest cover in all watersheds. There is need and room for at least **54 million more native trees** to achieve 30 per cent forest cover in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

More About SONC Partners and Quotes

Ontario Farmland Trust

A vision for the Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT) first emerged at a forum hosted by the University of Guelph's Farmland Preservation Research Project in 2002. Here, farmers, land conservationists, planners and academics worked together to lay the foundation for OFT—an organization with the unique ability to support grassroots, farmer-led and community-driven action on farmland protection.

"Farmland provides important connections between natural spaces like forests and wetlands. Farmers are stewards of the land, and many work hard to protect and improve wetlands and natural spaces for species at risk. Once we pave over farmland, it can never be returned to agriculture. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of a resilient local food system, and I am sure that future generations will never fault us for protecting too much land."

—Kathryn Enders, Executive Director, Ontario Farmland Trust

Ontario Land Trust Alliance

Ontario Land Trust Alliance (OLTA) is a registered charity focused on providing community, knowledge sharing and support to land trusts and other groups committed to land conservation across Ontario. By



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strategically protecting land, we contribute essential solutions to biodiversity loss and climate change. OLTA's member organizations collectively own and steward over 108,000 acres across Ontario, engaging the support of tens of thousands of local community volunteers and participants annually.

"Successfully protected, connected landscape conservation is collaborative. There is strength in numbers and working with other partner organizations in SONC has been so empowering. We have been able to come together as a united community to increase our collective impact to find solutions to help protect and steward near-urban biodiversity in southern Ontario."

—Alison Howson, Executive Director, Ontario Land Trust Alliance

Ontario Nature

Ontario Nature is a conservation organization that protects wild species and spaces through conservation, education and public engagement. A registered charity, Ontario Nature represents more than 30,000 members and supporters, and more than 150 member groups from across Ontario.

"There are many opportunities to advance the protection of near-urban nature through the designation of new protected areas, in the spirit and practice of Reconciliation and with the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples. Ontario Nature has identified many candidate sites of ecological and cultural significance that would help conserve biodiversity and enhance landscape resilience to climate change across the Greater Golden Horseshoe. What a legacy that would be!"

—Anne Bell, Director of Conservation and Education at Ontario Nature

Cambium Indigenous Professional Service

Cambium Indigenous Professional Service (CIPS) is an Indigenous owned, operated and uniquely all Indigenous staffed Environmental Consulting organization. Led by experienced, Indigenous consultants, we provide both Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients with professional and technical consulting services in a wide range of service areas ranging from Indigenous Engagement to Community Energy Planning. All our projects are approached with a traditional as well as western science perspective to ensure the betterment of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

"CIPS is pleased to be a SONC partner, assisting with ensuring meaningful inclusion and participation of the Williams Treaties First Nations, as well as the creation of Respectful, Reciprocal Relationships that can be built upon for the betterment of All Beings and our next seven generations."

—Kerry-Ann Charles, Environmental Partnership Coordinator, Cambium Indigenous Professional Services

Wildlands League

Wildlands League is one of Canada's pre-eminent conservation organizations. We protect wilderness. We collaborate with communities, governments, First Nations, scientists and progressive industry to protect nature and find solutions that work for the planet and for all. We are a not-for-profit charity that



has been working in the public interest since 1968, beginning with a campaign to protect Algonquin Park from development.

“Wildlands League has been excited to be part of the SONC Near-Urban Nature Project from the beginning. We have focused on the contributions of voluntary conservation measures to Near-Urban Nature conservation and protection, particularly Forest Stewardship Council certification for managed forests. We have highlighted the importance of Ecological Corridors in connecting a conservation area network of protected areas, natural areas, farmland, and managed forests. Having a broad exposure to other near-urban nature initiatives across the country, we have brought in those experiences to inform the SONC work in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Conservation initiatives in Windsor (Ojibway Prairie), Halifax (Blue Mountain/Birch Cove Lakes), and our experience in the creation of Rouge National Urban Park in particular have been instructive.”

—Dave Pearce, Forest Manager, Wildlands League

Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System

The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is a unique collaboration of partner agencies, landowners, stakeholders, and the community working together to conserve, protect, and support nearly 2,200 ha of natural lands linking Cootes Paradise with the Niagara Escarpment. Since 2007, the EcoPark System has evolved as a voluntary park alliance in which the participating agencies own and manage their lands individually but collaborate on areas of mutual interest through land securement, ecological restoration, recovery and remediation, education, research, and outreach with the public and landowners. This collaboration of government and not-for-profit agencies is successfully and voluntarily addressing threats to local natural areas such as habitat fragmentation, invasive species, climate change, water quality impairment, along with other anthropogenic effects within Hamilton and Burlington, Ontario.

“The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System acknowledges and values the support of our neighbouring landowners and the many municipal, regional, provincial and federal policies, programs, and initiatives that help conserve, protect, and restore our important natural lands. Collaborative efforts like the Southern Ontario Nature Coalition are vital opportunities to further such collaborative efforts on near urban natural areas across the region.”

—Tomasz Wiercioch, Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Coordinator, Royal Botanical Gardens

Carolinian Canada

Carolinian Canada is a network of leaders growing healthy landscapes for a green future in the Carolinian Zone, Canada’s extraordinary far south, in the spirit and practice of reconciliation. We connect science, community and business for healthy ecosystems and climate-smart neighbourhoods from Toronto to Windsor, Ontario. Our cross-sector platforms connect 300 groups, 5,000 volunteers and 37,000 hectares to save local wildlife, water and our way of life; and support 14 UN Sustainable Development Goals. Carolinian Canada Coalition is a Canadian Registered Charity.

“People who want to support parks, especially in peri-urban areas, have an important role to play in making space for native (locally wild) plants in the greater park ecosystem. From pollinator gardens and ecotrails, to climate-smart 'green infrastructure', native plants are the building blocks of healthy landscapes and a green economy. By choosing the right plant, a homeowner can literally grow "natural



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capital" and healthy ecosystems in their yard. The good news is that local ethical native plants are now available through a network of nurseries using voluntary ethical standards and practices, and some of the most exciting advancements are being led by Indigenous Communities who have a long history relationship with native plants."

—Michelle Kanter, Executive Director, Carolinian Canada

Greenbelt Foundation

Greenbelt Foundation is a charitable organization, solely dedicated to ensuring the Greenbelt remains permanent, protected and prosperous. We make the right investments in its interconnected natural, agricultural and economic systems, to ensure a working, thriving Greenbelt for all. Ontario's Greenbelt is the world's largest, with over two million acres of farmland, forests, wetlands and rivers working together to provide clean air, fresh water, and a reliable local food source.

"There are unique complexities to protecting near-urban nature in heavily developed regions like the Greater Golden Horseshoe," explains Edward McDonnell, CEO, Greenbelt Foundation. "From fragmented land-uses to high levels of private ownership, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, organizations, community leaders, farmers and other private landowners, and all levels of government must come together under a coordinated approach. The recommendations being released in SONC's Final Report can inform coordinated approaches to protecting near-urban nature across Canada and support governments in balancing urban growth with the need to create climate resilience and conserve biodiversity."

—Edward McDonnell, CEO, Greenbelt Foundation

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