

## **Water Management, within and without a CA**

Part of FOCA's vision for thriving and sustainable waterfronts across Ontario, now and for future generations, involves understanding, appreciating and properly stewarding our watersheds. No matter where you are in the Province, we rely on clean, abundant and properly managed water to make our communities thrive, and to keep our homes and our families safe.

FOCA has member associations in about 60 municipalities served by a Conservation Authority (**CA**). This Spring, FOCA participated in stakeholder meetings, and submitted written comments to the Province of Ontario, with respect to their proposed reforms to the Conservation Authorities Act. FOCA's input was about the significant interactions between lake associations and lake residents with CAs, and the importance of planning at a watershed level in the face of looming and increasing threats from changing precipitation patterns, threatened natural heritage and biodiversity, and the ongoing need for safe drinking water for all. The CA model has been recognized as a progressive approach to ensuring that flood risks are reduced, and that important natural heritage is protected for the many benefits it provides.

FOCA believes that thoughtful and proactive water quantity management is not only an ethical but also a practical obligation of our public bodies. Having an open and ongoing dialogue about challenges related to water quantity and quality, and doing this on a watershed basis, will allow the province and rural municipalities to minimize the impact from extreme climate impacts whether that be flood, drought, or water quality issues.

Ontario has long touted the benefits of adaptive management in their resource management strategies, and this can only be achieved if there is an appetite and an avenue for using up-to-date information and state of the art planning and adaptation strategies within our communities.

The Ontario Flood Advisor's report released in November 2019 showed strong support for the CA watershed model, in protecting Ontario from the risks of climate change. This model only works if CAs retain the authority to contribute to land use planning decisions, and if they have the necessary financial resources to productively contribute to watershed resilience.

FOCA posts related information, here: <https://foca.on.ca/conservation-authorities-act>.

## **Muskoka Watershed Advisory Group**

The Muskoka Watershed Advisory Group (**MWAG**) is an example of a regional initiative in a non-Conservation Authority area, where efforts are underway to understand and address water concerns on a watershed basis.

In August 2019, the Ontario Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks announced the appointment of the 9-member advisory group that was charged with compiling community expert advice about managing the region's water quantity and quality. FOCA appreciated the opportunity to contribute both at the Community Listening Sessions in January 2020, and via written input through the Committee.

In our comments, FOCA noted that, when the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (**MNR**) posted their “Maintaining Water Management Plans Technical Bulletin” effective August 2016, the new Technical Guidelines affirmed that water management plans (**WMPs**) may require periodic amendments to ensure that the plans remain current, to include adaptive management or simply to provide clarity and certainty on how water levels and flows are managed. FOCA was pleased to see that, according to the Guidelines:

- any party with an interest in the WMP can bring forward issues to the attention of plan proponents, to the Ministry, or members of the Standing Advisory Committee.
- amendment requests can be related to dam safety, public safety, dam operations, the results of monitoring programs, construction of new dams or alterations to existing dams, or in response to local issues related to the management of water levels and flows.

FOCA also noted that the water management plan proponent is responsible for assessing amendment requests and preparing the amendment proposal and that all amendments require approval by the Ministry.

Taking a watershed approach allows for a more comprehensive consideration of many of the impinging and related aspects of water quantity and quality management. **In other words, by managing the uplands, by managing wetlands and other connected features, we can both ameliorate extreme flows when they happen and help to improve water quality.**

FOCA remains hopeful that, as part of the current efforts to be more thoughtful in the approach to the Muskoka River Watershed, it will be reasonable to utilize these existing provisions to allow for a more robust community discussion about the existing water regime, the drawdown and water levels and targets, and other aspects of the water management plan. Improving the dialogue on water quantity management should allow the public and stakeholders to more fully appreciate and understand the water management objectives and operations, and the practical realities of the local water regime.

The lessons learned in Muskoka through the 2019-2020 consultations, and the future actions that result, should be viewed with an eye to providing guidance in other areas of the province that are similarly facing water quantity/quality management issues. One example is investing in floodplain mapping and the related policy and implementation measures to avoid flood risk in our communities, which is money well spent when you consider the cost to families, communities, and the overall economy of continually repairing assets that are in harms way.

Find stories from other regions, and historical context about water management plans, posted by FOCA, here: <https://foca.on.ca/water-management-plans-still-in-limbo/>.