

FOCA perspectives on watershed management, flooding, environmental stewardship – and the role of Conservation Authorities.

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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.

The comments below are some context of watershed-wide management, such as the Muskoka Watershed Advisory Group (MWAG), as well as the emerging role of Conservation Authorities(CAs).

To start, 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 an 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 lessons learned in Muskoka through the 2019-20 consultations and the future actions that result should be viewed with an eye to providing guidance in other areas of the province who 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.

Many of FOCA's member associations are located in one of 60 different municipalities that fund and utilize the services of a local CA. FOCA has seen the important role these agencies serve, from flood planning, permitting, warning, and management, delivering source water protection, and for a variety of expertise they provide related to local resource management.

FOCA is aware that there are necessary improvements to the alignment of responsibilities of the hazard lands responsibilities within Section 28 of the CA Act, and have been informed that MNRF and Conservation Ontario are in the process of tweaking their delivery of these important services.

CA's will be better able to do their job with more clearly defined terms in the Act. Having said that, the flexible nature of their available tools is currently subject to the oversight of their respective Boards; municipal representation and leadership through the CA Boards affords these local agencies the input and direction from the level of government most directly served by the CA's.

Local levies are the primary source of funding for Conservation Authorities; the Province needs to evaluate (and likely INCREASE) their funding support for provincially mandated services; we understand the Province currently provides somewhat less than 10% of the overall funding for CA's, on average.

Important programming that has benefitted the waterfront property owner (FOCA's members) includes source water protection, hazard land management, citizen science and engagement, and land and water stewardship programming.

Note: FOCA will be providing further commentary with respect to the Conservation Authority Act review as part of the public consultation in March 2020

Areas outside of CA jurisdiction

For MWAG, we recognize the important context of the deliberations on watershed issues in Muskoka region, and have appreciated the opportunity to contribute both at the Community Listening Sessions in Port Carling on January 23, 2020 and via written input through the Committee Chair.

We note that effective August 2016, when MNRF posted their "Maintaining Water Management Plans Technical Bulletin", the new Technical Guidelines affirmed that 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.

We also note 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.

We remain hopeful that as part of the current efforts to be more thoughtful in the approach to the Muskoka River Watershed, that 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 MRWMP. Improving the dialogue on water quantity management will allow the public and stakeholders to more fully appreciate, understand and ultimately buy into the water management objectives and operations and the practical realities of the local water regime.

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.

Further, while we encourage the MWAG to thoughtfully consider what further water quality information may be required to develop strategies and set longer-term priorities, we would also encourage you to suggest early investments in policies and tools to address those areas most in need of action and that have already been identified in the Muskoka Watershed Report Card and elsewhere.

Finally, I hope the recommendations of this group are made in the spirit of being aspirational, and with some thought to how the approach being undertaken (or recommended) in Muskoka might be

employed elsewhere in the Province, especially where there are no existing watershed agencies already in place.

FOCA looks forward to the opportunity to continue to be involved in this dialogue and to help build a water management regime in Muskoka and beyond that reflects communities needs, the need for safe and resilient communities, and that is appropriately organized and adequately resourced.

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