

Ontario Lake Stewards 2025



Shaping the Future of Waterfront Ontario—Together

by Lesley Lavender, CEO, FOCA

As the seasons shift once more across our lakes and rivers, we find ourselves reflecting on both change and continuity.

At FOCA, that balance has defined our work over the past year ensuring our members remain informed, engaged, and empowered, while we adapt to meet emerging challenges and seize opportunities to safeguard our shared future.

In the past year, we've seen meaningful momentum. Over 900 FOCA members joined a successful letter-writing campaign to defend the **Lake Partner Program**, which is Ontario's largest, long-standing citizen science initiative that monitors inland lake health. Your efforts reached decisionmakers, made headlines, and helped to reinforce the program's critical role in tracking long-term environmental change. Together, we made it clear: this work matters, and the province heard us.

FOCA also voiced strong opposition to **Bill 5**, legislation that introduced sweeping changes with minimal consultation. We continue to call for transparency and community engagement in decisions that affect land use, water, and rural infrastructure. Our advocacy efforts have spanned from addressing the growing concern over **floating accommodations** to **protecting source water** and holding direct conversations with elected officials. These efforts are rooted in respect, persistence, and a shared commitment to Ontario's waterfronts.

Much of our work is less visible but just as vital — hosting workshops, publishing resources, and helping associations navigate local issues, from property taxes to short-term rentals. We're especially proud to support **generational transitions**: helping families 'pass the torch' while ensuring younger generations feel connected to their lake, their local association, and FOCA.

This intergenerational work takes on greater urgency in the face of **climate change**. It's easy to feel the weight of the challenge, especially when conversations are shaped by fear, guilt, or misunderstanding. Older members may wonder how their contributions will be seen, while younger ones may question whether their voices will be heard. But at FOCA, we believe every generation has a role and a responsibility. The key is listening, learning, and acting together. We've seen inspiring examples of communities embracing climate action as a shared legacy project, not just a crisis to be endured.

None of this is possible without **your support**. As a not-for-profit, FOCA depends on your membership and donations to fuel our work. Every single contribution, whether it's financial, participatory, or sharing our messaging, helps us protect Ontario's freshwater future.

Our collective strength lies in numbers. When you stand with FOCA, you are part of a powerful movement that has tackled issues from acid rain to invasive species, from emergency response to shoreline resilience. Even if you never attend a meeting, make a call, or click a link, **your FOCA membership is a quiet but vital act of stewardship**.

Thank you for being part of this ongoing story. Whether you've been a steward for decades, or are just beginning your lake journey, your involvement makes a difference. Let's keep moving forward together.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment and support.

Land Acknowledgment: We recognize and thank the traditional stewards of the lands and waterways where we work and live. The waterfront lands of Ontario are the traditional territories of many diverse Indigenous peoples who recognize the sacredness of water, the interconnectedness of all life, and the importance of protecting land and water for the generations yet to come. We are all on a journey towards truth and reconciliation and offer this recognition as an important step in that journey. We live in different locations, and so we encourage each of you to dedicate yourselves to move forward in the spirit of respect, reciprocity, learning and sharing that learning.

What's that 'Weed' in your Water?

If you've ever wondered about the plants growing in and around your lake, FOCA's new guide 'Understanding the Underwater World of Plants' is for you.

This downloadable resource helps waterfront property owners and lake enthusiasts better understand the important role aquatic plants play in healthy freshwater ecosystems. **The guide is organized into three main sections:**

Chapter 1: Aquatic Plants in Lake Ecology

Learn about what's living in your Ontario lake or river, and get an overview of plant ecology: why particular aquatic plants are found where they are, and what they do for us and for the ecosystem.

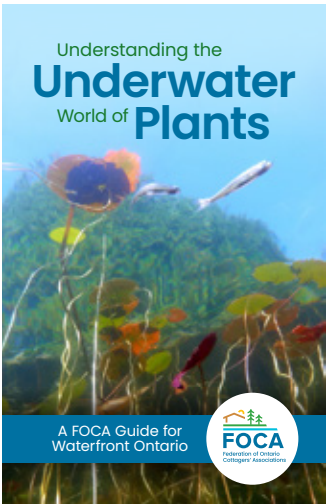
Chapter 2: Aquatic Plants of Ontario

Learn how to identify many native, non-native, and invasive aquatic plants commonly found in Ontario, through descriptions and images of each plant and its leaves, flowers and habitat.

Chapter 3: Management Considerations

FOCA's guide offers practical advice on managing aquatic vegetation responsibly and legally, with tips on various removal techniques, and how to prevent the spread of invasive species to other waterbodies.

Packed with helpful photos and clear explanations, FOCA's Guide to Aquatic Plants is an essential resource for everyone who spends time on Ontario's lakes and rivers.



*Download your
free copy today
at [foca.on.ca/
aquatic-plants](https://foca.on.ca/aquatic-plants).*

*Happy plant
detecting!*

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Why Youth? Why Now?

FOCA's vision to sustain and enhance the cottage experience depends on the next generation.

At FOCA, we believe that protecting Ontario's freshwater legacy doesn't just mean testing lakes or managing invasive species today, it means ensuring there's someone to do it tomorrow. That's why youth engagement isn't just a nice idea. It's a necessity.

Our more than 550 member associations are powered by passionate, knowledgeable volunteers who know their lakes inside and out. But we all recognize a simple truth: the future of our shorelines, water quality, and rural communities rests in the hands of those who will come after us.

In short: we need to steward the next generation of stewards.

That's why FOCA has made youth engagement a growing priority.

Planting Seeds for Tomorrow's Lake Stewards

Throughout 2024, FOCA took part in a number of youth-focused events that combined fun, learning, and a deep respect for nature.

We joined hundreds of enthusiastic students at the Haliburton-Muskoka-Kawartha's Children's Water Festival (HMKCWF) in July and October.

Children's water festivals have a long history across Ontario — in Grey-Bruce, Perth, Niagara, Peterborough, Sudbury, and beyond — connecting kids with nature through collaboration with school boards, towns, and conservation authorities.

The HMKCWF, now approaching its 20th year, has inspired more than 16,000 students to take action in their homes and communities. As Festival Coordinator Kara Mitchell explained, "Climate change, pollution, and resource depletion are urgent challenges. These programs equip children with actionable knowledge to tackle these issues."

FOCA couldn't agree more.

How to Use a Secchi Disk

A Secchi disk is a tool for measuring water clarity. The black and white patterned disk is lowered on a rope into the water until it is no longer visible. That depth is measured and recorded.

Secchi depth values that are high indicate clearer water, while low Secchi depths indicate more turbidity (amount of suspended solids in the water). Over time, the readings can be compared to previous data to indicate if water conditions are changing. Turbidity matters to aquatic systems as it can alter light intensity through the water column which affects photosynthesis and other conditions that could affect plants and fish.



At the summer event, hosted by FOCA member group Kennisis Lake Cottage Owners Association (KLCOA), FOCA led a *'What's in the Water?'* activity. Kids got hands-on with water testing tools from the Lake Partner Program (LPP), including the Secchi disk, learning firsthand why water clarity matters, and what the data tells us.

At the fall edition of the Children's Water Festival at Kinark Outdoor Centre, FOCA was one of over 30 partner organizations sharing knowledge about sustainability, watershed health, and the science of freshwater. These events aim to spark lifelong curiosity and care which is a vital first step in shaping tomorrow's environmental champions.

Finally, read more on page 6 about FOCA's recent work with an award-winning grade school science class, and their remote water monitoring project.

Engaging Youth at Every Age

It's not just grade-schoolers who are getting involved. In early 2025, FOCA participated in a stakeholder interview with a University of Guelph biology class, exploring how we tackle invasive aquatic plants and share that knowledge with the public. The students are now building projects to propose solutions — a great example of practical, applied learning in action.

We also brought some fresh energy to our Lake Partner Program videos this year, thanks to our 2024 Summer Student. These new short clips, designed for social media, help a younger audience connect with lake science in a simple, accessible way. You can watch and share them from our website: foca.on.ca/lake-partner-program/#video.

What You Can Do

If you're already involved in lake stewardship, you know how fulfilling and vital it is. **Now, please help us pass it on.**

Whether you're out doing water testing, attending a local AGM, or helping with shoreline clean-up, FOCA encourages you to **bring a younger person along**. Let them see, firsthand, what caring for the lake looks like. Maybe it's your child, your grandchild, or a neighbour's kid — anyone who might be the next great Lake Steward in Training.

Together, we can inspire the next generation to love the water and care for it as much as we do.



Top: LPP video clip. Bottom: Explaining Secchi disk water monitoring at the Kennisis Water Festival, courtesy KLCOA.

Passing the Torch: Generational Action for Climate

FOCA Fall Seminar for Associations

Saturday, Sept. 20, 2025 • 9am–noon by Zoom webinar

On the National Climate Day of Action, join FOCA to get inspired about intergenerational engagement for the good of the environment.

\$53 members/\$83 non-members

Members get one free webinar link for an attendee under age 30!

Spotlight on Young Stewards: Equipe Francobotique

Late last year, FOCA connected with the Equipe Francobotique team of eight French immersion students in grades 5 to 7 who live in and around Aurora, and have just won an international competition this June for their science project.



Left: Equipe Francobotique members; Right: FOCA and the Team water testing on Lake Simcoe this spring.

Every year, local schoolteacher Renee Northrup encourages a team of her students to compete in the **FIRST Lego League**, a STEM program competition for 9 to 16-year-old kids across the globe. Participants compete in problem solving, coding, engineering, and programming for a robotics phase, and a focused project phase. This year's theme for the project phase was **oceans**, but due to the team's distance from an ocean, they decided to focus instead on issues facing freshwater lakes in Canada.

FOCA's Assistant Lake Stewardship Coordinator spoke extensively with the team and teacher during their research phase last year, as they interviewed industry experts about water projects and freshwater science needs.

We noted that the kids were well aware that the environment faces challenges. They learned that Canada's freshwater systems are facing increased pressure, and that water quality data is needed to track and deal with the issues. They were impressed to know that Canada holds 20% of the world's freshwater, and expressed surprise when told that most Canadians don't realize how lucky we are to have so many beautiful lakes.

The kids discussed ways to conserve water at home like taking a shorter shower, not leaving taps running unnecessarily, and other tips, as well as the water sampling that takes place in FOCA's Lake Partner Program, to highlight trends and changes over time.

They also told us how important Ontario's lakes are to some of their own summer experiences. Fascinated with science and robotics, and by the complexities of water quality data collection, they decided to create their own water sampling robot for the competition.

The team went on to regional and then provincial competitions late in 2024, using creative thinking and LEGO technology to explore water questions and 'sea' into the future. Successful in both rounds, the team finally participated in an international tournament in June 2025, where they received a perfect score in the robot competition, earning first place for the **'Robot Performance Award'**. Their water science project earned them a **'Finalist Award – Engineering Excellence'**.

The team reported they were further inspired by the projects of fellow teams they interacted with at the LEGO League events, and noted that taking on this project has helped them to better understand the complexity of ecosystems.

Congratulations, team! We look forward to seeing what these young water science enthusiasts come up with next.

Cottage Succession: Passing the Torch

How will your family manage the generational transfer of cottage ownership?

For over fifteen years, FOCA and estate lawyer Peter Lillico have helped families navigate the complexities of cottage succession planning.

Even if you're not ready to transfer ownership yet, now is the time to understand your options and safeguard your family's future at the waterfront.

Each year, FOCA hosts webinars with Peter that provide an overview of the process and dive into key topics like capital gains tax, trusts, timing (during life or upon death), and the value of a Cottage Sharing Agreement.

Upcoming Webinar

Trust the Cottage: Protect the Family Legacy AND Save Taxes

Wednesday, September 10, 2025, at 7:00pm

Register at: foca.on.ca/cottage-succession.

FOCA member families and Friends of FOCA attend free (a \$35 value) — just include your FOCA affiliation when registering.

Passing the Torch

In 2025, FOCA launched a monthly *'Ask the Expert'* column in our e-newsletter, featuring Peter's answers to member questions about cottage succession.

Example question from Jim S.:

We're U.S. residents who purchased a Canadian cottage while living in Canada. Our Canadian-resident children want to keep the cottage. What legal and tax considerations should we keep in mind? Should we transfer ownership now or later? What are the cross-border tax implications?

Peter's summary advice:

- Transferring the cottage during your lifetime may be a smart option, depending on tax, legal, financial, and family factors.
- An 'early inheritance' can have both pros and cons; work with professionals to assess the best path.
- A cross-border tax accountant is essential to navigate capital gains, U.S. estate and gift taxes, and Canada's deemed disposition rules.

Start with tax advice — your succession strategy will follow from there.

FOCA members can read more Q&As by logging in at foca.on.ca/cottage-succession. Got a question for Peter? Email programs@foca.on.ca with the subject line: Passing the Torch.

New Video: US & Canadian Tax Planning



This April, FOCA released a 1.5-hour digital recording focused on cross-border succession and tax issues, featuring experts Peter Lillico and Kaz Nesbitt (CPA, CA, and tax planning accountant, Doane Grant Thornton LLP). It contains insights worth several hundreds of dollars in professional consultations; let this video be your starting point, at a fraction of that cost.

FOCA members get a \$75 discount using the code posted under the login on our Cottage Succession webpage (regular price: \$250). For login assistance or to join FOCA, email info@foca.on.ca.

Weathering the Storm: Insurance in a Changing Climate

by Ross Fraser of Cade Associates Insurance Brokers,
FOCA's 'Cottage Champion' sponsor

Unfortunately, many readers of this magazine will have had first-hand experience of the striking damage caused by the prolonged winter storm between March 28th and 31st this year. In the hardest-hit areas of the Kawarthas, Muskoka, and Haliburton, freezing rain fell for more than 35 hours encasing trees, power lines, and homes in thick ice.

Insured losses are already estimated at more than \$400 million, making it one of the costliest spring weather events in Ontario's history.

It's a stark reminder that the impacts of a changing climate are no longer a conversation for a distant future; it is already affecting our properties, communities, and insurance policies. This is just the continuation of an already stark trend. According to the Insurance Bureau of Canada (IBC), 2024 set a new national record for insured catastrophic losses, with damages totaling more than \$8.5 billion.

To put that in perspective, this is nearly triple the losses recorded in both 2022 and 2023, and more than twelve times higher than the annual average just a decade ago. In the span of just one month in 2024, four separate weather events devastated the country, from Calgary hailstorms, to flash flooding in Ontario, and wildfires in the west. Each of these events individually exceeded a billion dollars in insured damages.

What is driving such a dramatic rise in claims? Like so many other issues, a mix of factors are at play. A changing climate is intensifying storms and increasing the frequency of extreme weather events. At the same time, the cost to repair and rebuild has skyrocketed due to many factors that include supply chain issues, skilled labour shortages, and rising costs of materials and transport. Combined, this creates a volatile situation for insurers and policyholders alike.

What Cottagers Need to Know

In Ontario, many cottage properties are in areas that are increasingly exposed to the effects of our changing climate including, but not limited to, wildfires in forested or remote regions, ice storms that bring down trees or cut power for days, and heavy rain that overwhelms local systems in low-lying areas.

These developments are present risks worthy of additional consideration by the insurance industry, and by property owners.

Insurers are responding in several ways.

First, as carriers adjust to the growing cost of annual claims, premiums with many insurance providers are increasing. In higher risk areas, insurers may opt to restrict or remove coverages altogether.

Certain water coverages, for example, may be excluded in regions prone to flooding or too close to a body of water. It is more important than ever to read and understand your insurance policy. Know what is and is not covered.

It is in your best interest to work with an insurance broker who understands seasonal and secondary homes, and who can help you identify gaps in your protection.

Get a quote or more information:

1-844-223-3178 • cadeinsurance.com/cottagefirst



Consider Climate Resilience

While no one household can stop a catastrophic weather event, there are steps you can take to make your property more resilient.

Simple landscaping choices can create defensible space around buildings, reducing wildfire risk. FOCA offers excellent digital materials about FireSmart principles to reduce the risk of wildland fires impacting structures on your property. See page 22 for more information.

Installing impact-resistant roofing materials like cement fibre, metal, or asphalt shingles can help guard against wind and hail damage from major storms.

Consider the installation of a backup power supply, even a small one to sustain the essentials.

For homes with a below-ground lower level, the installation of a backwater valve and/or a sump pump with a backup power supply can help to manage water intrusion.

Even relatively simple steps can help. Regular maintenance — such as cleaning eavestroughs, securing patio furniture before a storm, trimming dead tree limbs, moving piled wood supplies away from structures, and so on — can help protect your property during extreme events, and may prevent or reduce damage claims.

What's Next?

Industry-wide, efforts are underway to ensure insurance coverage stability in the face of increasingly significant weather events. Following massive flooding in 2013 in Alberta and Ontario, the insurance industry launched new coverages such as overland water protection that were previously unavailable to most consumers.



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Ice storm damage: (top) courtesy Hydro One; (bottom) courtesy Deanna Forgie.

More recently, the federal government has continued to work with insurers towards the creation of a national flood insurance program, which would be designed to protect properties that otherwise might not be able to secure coverage through traditional means.

Provincial building codes and municipal planning guidelines are also under review to reflect these new realities. The Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction, created by Canada's property and casualty insurance industry and affiliated with Western University, has grown into a significant resource promoting disaster resilience research and public education.

For individual property owners, the message is clear: while we can't control the weather, we can control how we prepare for it.

Whether by updating infrastructure, safeguarding natural shorelines, or stepping up property maintenance habits, it's up to everyone to plan for the future, and to be ready for tomorrow. Investing in property-level resilience is one of the most effective ways we can adapt to our changing climate.

The more we do today, the better positioned we will be to weather whatever comes next.

Saving the Lake Partner Program

In early May 2025, FOCA issued an urgent call-to-action to our members and supporters to help us save the Lake Partner Program (LPP) of water quality monitoring across Ontario.

The program has run for three decades as a partnership between FOCA's volunteer Lake Stewards who do the water sampling, and the Ontario Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) whose Ministry scientists analyze the samples and publish the datasets.

However, our 5-year agreement with MECP ended this March, and two and a half months later — with the sampling season already underway — FOCA still had no signed agreement that the program would continue. Despite repeated outreach to our partners, we had a long silence and no confirmation.

That's where you came in.

FOCA provided a template letter, and encouraged everyone to personalize messages to the Premier, Minister of MECP, and local MPPs, asking them to continue the LPP.

We are thrilled to report that FOCA was copied on over 600 letters of support (and we understand that many hundreds more were sent); enjoy some highlights below!

In your own words...

Here are just a handful of excerpts from the hundreds of heartfelt letters that FOCA received from supporters about the LPP, sent to the Premier and Minister of MECP:

"I have served as the Lake Steward on my lake for many years. In this role I have volunteered for the LPP for over 20 years – in fact just yesterday I collected 18 samples from 6 locations around the lake..."

"I am not only a resident and taxpayer in Ontario, but I am also an aquatic scientist with 30 years of experience studying freshwater ecosystems, including lakes. Having run water quality programs and utilized the long-term data from the LPP, I cannot over emphasize how important it is to maintain the continuity of this program."

"...our lake has faced persistent and damaging blue-green algae blooms for decades, posing a serious public health concern. The LPP provides one of the most valuable long-term datasets available, offering essential insights into phosphorus, chloride, calcium and Secchi trends. ... All data is critical but the LPP's long-term data is the benchmark in the field, and it greatly enhances our collective ability to protect Ontario's lakes."

"I am a freshwater consultant who often has been relying on LLP data when helping lake associations, municipalities, and other consultant firms to evaluate lakes and establish management plans to improve their water quality. Often, the LLP data are the only consistent long-term records for Ontario lakes that are not otherwise monitored. ... As the program also educates people, brings them together on important environmental issues and generally provides positive feelings, I definitely hope that needed funding will continue and be increased, if possible."

"...our association considers this program to be so important that the coordinator of the program [on our lake] sits on our Board of Directors."

"I have been water testing for years. In fact, a few years ago, I sold my boat and bought a larger one with a bigger motor because of increasing winds which made it difficult to do the water testing each summer. I, and others, take our responsibility to this program very seriously."

"Our lakes are a key economic driver of Muskoka and water quality is the top priority for our association members. We cannot manage what is not measured."



Left: 2024 samples from Lake St. John (courtesy Noah Stegman).
Right: Holding volunteers' returned Secchi depth reports last fall.

Most importantly, FOCA now has a signed agreement with MECP that enables us to continue the LPP over the coming five years, with the support of more than 600 volunteer Lake Stewards across the province.

Thank you to the Province of Ontario and our Ministry partners, whose ongoing involvement makes this important work possible, on behalf of waterfront Ontario.

"I want to thank our longstanding partner FOCA for their excellent delivery of the Lake Partner Program — the largest of its kind in Canada — and the hundreds of dedicated community volunteers taking water samples from their local lakes every summer," said Todd McCarthy, Minister of MECP, in FOCA's media release about the program confirmation on June 20, 2025. "By continuing to support this vital program," the Minister added, "we are able to monitor water quality and take action when needed to protect the health of lakes and communities across Ontario."

*Thank you all for your efforts and support!
Our voices were heard.*

Attention Lake Stewards:

Please proceed with your summer sampling if you haven't already.

The Assistant Lake Stewardship Coordinator is back in action, and your returned samples will be processed at the Ministry lab as usual. Thank you for your patience as we catch up on two and a half months of emails and work. Thank you also for your ongoing volunteer efforts on behalf of the program. Your involvement is invaluable! We congratulate you for your commitment.

Unsure if your waterbody is already being sampled in the Lake Partner Program?

FOCA's webpage contains a link to data up to 2024, and a map with data up to 2022, provided by the Ontario Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks: foca.on.ca/lake-partner-program/#results. If your lake isn't listed, we might need you as our next volunteer.

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Re-thinking De-icing: Who is Working to Reduce Salt Pollution in our Waters?

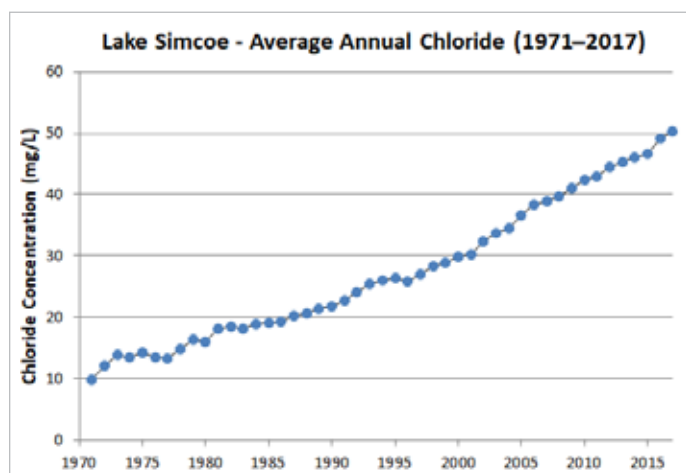
by Michelle Lewin, FOCA, with notes from FOTMW, OSPC, and others listed

We all know road salt is intended to help keep winter drives safe—but when that same salt ends up in lakes and rivers, it can pose serious problems for the health of our freshwaters.

Chloride, the key component in road salt, is a naturally occurring element and essential in small amounts. But too much of it disrupts aquatic ecosystems, where most organisms simply aren't built to handle high salt levels.

"The key animals affected by road salt are zooplankton, several species of which are Daphnia, the common water flea which are vital to our freshwater ecosystems," noted Alesha Breckenridge of the *Friends of the Muskoka Watershed (FOTMW)*. "Daphnia feed on algae which help to maintain the clear waters that attract us to cottage country. In addition, Daphnia are key species in many aquatic food chains and an indicator of healthy waterways; and healthy, biodiverse lakes are resilient in the face of other stressors."

Many of Ontario's cottage lakes are located on the Precambrian Shield, which means the water is soft, with low levels of calcium. Although Canada's water quality guideline allows for up to 120 mg/L of continuous chloride exposure, new research suggests anything above 20 mg/L (perhaps even 10 mg/L) could be harmful.



Courtesy Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority

Eyes on the Water

Local groups and volunteers are already on the case. This year, FOTMW released a compelling new report authored by Neil Hutchinson, titled: *Citizen Science Investigations of Road Salt Pollution in Muskoka: 2022-2024*. With the help of community samplers, the group collected over 600 measurements from 27 different sites, many near salted roads. The findings? Chloride levels were elevated near sources of salt—such as roads, plazas and paved parking lots—and worse, those spikes didn't disappear with the snow. Salt's impact persisted well into summer, confirming that this is not just a winter problem.

A Call for Smarter Salt Use

At the provincial level, momentum is building for change. Back in 2020, the *Freshwater Roundtable* released a discussion paper to spotlight the issue, focusing on the Lake Simcoe watershed. The Roundtable included environmental partners, conservation authorities, and industry groups like the Building Owners and Managers Association Toronto and others, working together to find ways to reduce salt impacts.

In late 2023, FOCA joined over 100 stakeholders at a meeting hosted by *Landscape Ontario* to talk salt—from environmental risks to infrastructure damage and even snowplow operator liability.

FOCA continues to champion smart salt use through partnerships, advocacy, and science. Dr. Shelley Arnott, a *Queen's University* scientist, spoke to our membership about salt impacts at a recent FOCA AGM; her slides are posted under the member login on our salt webpage (see next page). Additionally, FOCA's *Lake Partner Program* helps monitor chloride levels in Ontario lakes, providing important long-term data on this significant issue.

Tools, Training, and Policy Progress

If you're wondering what else is being done about the problem, here is a quick overview.

The **Smart About Salt Council (SASC)** is a non-profit formed by government and industry in 2009, that offers North American training and certification in winter maintenance good practices for facility owners and operators. Their focus? Using the right amount of salt, at the right time, in the right way.

One of SASC's recommendations is to switch to liquid salt application—spraying roads with a salty brine before and after storms. It's a method that uses much less salt, appears to improve coverage, and could help reduce costly slip-and-fall lawsuits. That's good news for FOCA's road associations, many of whom have seen winter snowplowing costs skyrocket in recent years. Lawsuits driving higher insurance premiums for service providers can be a big contributor to increasing costs. (Check out pages 8 and 9 for related insights from our partners at Cade Associates Insurance Brokers.)

For more on salt impacts and policy, refer to our partners' resources like **Conservation Ontario's** digital '**Salt Responsibly Story Map**' full of relevant and helpful information. Also, **Watersheds Canada** released a Road Salt Policy Review last year, summarizing various related provincial and federal government policies.



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Building Public Pressure

Meanwhile, the **Ontario Salt Pollution Coalition (OSPC)** is pushing the Province to act. Coordinated by Water Watchers, OSPC includes environmental NGOs, concerned citizens, and community leaders. The message is clear: Ontario uses more winter salt than any other province — half of Canada's total, in fact — and we need legislative change.

In a **letter-writing campaign** open until August 10, 2025, OSPC is asking the Province to create a salt-use certification process for winter contractors, and to provide improved legal protection to those who would follow provincially endorsed best practices. The idea is to encourage reduced winter salt use without fear of lawsuits. FOCA and Landscape Ontario have made this appeal to Ontario's Attorney General numerous times over the past 5 years.

There is also an OSPC '**Municipal Resolution Toolkit**' — bring it to the attention of your local township, encouraging them to write the Province in support of this effort. More than a dozen Ontario municipalities have already passed resolutions supporting the need for provincial action on salt pollution, including the District of Muskoka and the City of Sudbury.

Your Role in Reducing Salt Use

FOTMW reminds everyone that a cup of road salt that is 12 ounces (350 ml) should suffice for an average homeowner driveway or 10 sidewalk squares. A little goes a long way. Also, road salt is ineffective if used in temperatures below 10°C.

"The **SALTYMuskoka Citizen Action Project** was created to support a collective response to road salt pollution across Muskoka," noted FOTMW. "Recognizing that 20% of the source of road salt pollution comes from personal use on walkways, sidewalks, driveways and parking lots, SALTYMuskoka aims to empower individuals, businesses, and winter maintenance professionals to reduce their use of road salt to protect our watershed forever."

Learn More & Take Action

The salty tide is starting to turn—but it will take continued community involvement on road salt overuse to truly protect our freshwater future.

For links to all the partners and resources mentioned above, visit FOCA's webpage: foca.on.ca/salt-impacts/.

Spotlight on Success: FOCA's 2024 Award Recipient

*Each year, FOCA proudly recognizes the important work of our member associations by presenting one of them with the **Terry Rees Achievement Award**. This award shines a light on association successes in our province-wide community, and we hope it inspires others to take local action as well!*

The 2024 award was presented at this year's FOCA Annual General Meeting to the **White Lake Property Owners Association (WLPOA)** for environmental monitoring and stewardship led by enthusiastic volunteer community scientists, Conrad Grégoire and David Overholt.

Conrad and David are retired environmental scientists who have brought a wealth of expertise – and an incredible amount of dedication – to their work on White Lake. For more than a decade, they've been active in the Lake Partner Program, and have spearheaded local initiatives to monitor water quality and wildlife, including loon and cormorant surveys.



Their commitment is evident in WLPOA's bi-monthly Environment Bulletin, an annual State of the Lake Report, and a comprehensive White Lake Science website (wlpp.ca/) that educates the community on a range of environmental issues.

In 2024, Conrad and David also participated in **IsampleON**, a pilot project led by FOCA and the Invasive Species Centre to explore the power of community-led invasive species detection using cutting-edge eDNA testing. Through their careful sampling protocols (comparing traditional plankton net sampling with new eDNA testing methods), Zebra Mussels were confirmed in White Lake in both sampling methods – unfortunate news for the lake, but an exciting validation of community science. Conrad and David's meticulous work helped demonstrate that volunteers, when well-supported, can produce accurate and meaningful environmental data.

Nominate your Association Next!

Visit FOCA's website for information about past award recipients, and how to make a nomination by October 31, 2025: foca.on.ca/award.



Addressing Biodiversity Loss in Ontario

Ontario's biodiversity is under growing pressure from land use changes, invasive species, climate change, pollution, and unsustainable resource use. The time to act is now.

Late in 2024, FOCA joined more than 60 partner organizations to call on the Government of Ontario to take urgent action to protect and restore nature across the province. FOCA and others signed a joint letter urging the Province to implement its own Biodiversity Strategy and align provincial actions with Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy. The renewed **Ontario's Biodiversity Strategy** provides a clear roadmap for conserving our province's rich natural diversity.

It outlines five strategic directions:
empowering people, reducing threats,
enhancing resilience, improving knowledge,
and transforming investment.

These are not just environmental goals — they are essential actions that will improve human health, strengthen communities, and support a sustainable economy.

Yet, recent reporting shows that more than half of Ontario's biodiversity targets are showing little progress. Marking the 20th anniversary of Ontario's Biodiversity Strategy this year must be more than symbolic. It must be a **turning point for nature**.

In May 2025, FOCA staff participated in the **Ontario Biodiversity Summit**, fittingly themed '**Our Turning Point for Nature**,' joining others from across sectors to discuss solutions and renewed commitments to biodiversity conservation and communication.

Our Role: FOCA's role, along with our partners, is to keep this issue on the radar, and to keep pushing for real action that benefits nature and people alike.

Your Roles: Visit FOCA's website for our joint letter to government, and to read the 2025 '**State of Ontario's Biodiversity**' Summary Report: foca.on.ca/biodiversity.

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Protecting Drinking Water at the Source: Building Safer Communities Across Ontario

by Terry Rees

Access to safe and clean drinking water is essential for each of us.

Whether you live in a city, a small town, or on a lake in cottage country, your health depends on the quality of the water you drink. That's why Ontario created the *Clean Water Act, 2006* — a forward-thinking law designed to protect drinking water before it ever reaches your tap.

At its heart, the Clean Water Act recognizes a simple truth: the best way to ensure safe drinking water is to **protect it at the source**. This means taking steps to keep lakes, rivers, and groundwater — the natural sources of our drinking water — free from pollution and other threats. Preventing contamination is far more effective and less costly than trying to treat water after it's already been compromised.

While large municipal systems in Ontario benefit from comprehensive **source protection plans** (developed through local Source Protection Committees and backed by provincial regulation) many smaller, rural, and seasonal communities fall outside of these formal programs. These include thousands of lake-based communities, where residents draw water from wells or directly from lakes and rivers. These communities are equally vulnerable to contamination risks, yet often lack the tools, expertise, and resources to assess and manage those risks.

This is where FOCA is stepping in to help.

FOCA is working closely with local lake associations to bridge the gap in source water protection for rural and lake-based communities. Together, we are helping to build a deeper understanding of where drinking water comes from, what threatens it, and how residents can work together to protect it.



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While FOCA has been committed to drinking source water protection for 20+ years, in 2024 we undertook a project with members of the Kinmount Park Estates Association in the City of Kawartha Lakes, and with the support of Dillon Consulting — experts in drinking water management, to pilot a community-driven source protection plan, incorporating local knowledge.

Based on the lessons learned from this project, in 2025 FOCA has engaged three member associations (Lake Bernard Property Owners Association, Halls and Hawk Lakes Property Owners Association, and Little Silver and Rainbow Lakes Property Owners Association) to deliver their own volunteer-led source water protection community planning. These groups will help FOCA develop a template for other interested members to follow, going forward.

FOCA's approach focuses on education, capacity-building, and practical planning tools. This includes training for volunteers and lake stewards, support for community-based water monitoring, and guidance for developing locally relevant water protection plans. By connecting lake associations with scientific expertise, online mapping tools, and local success stories, FOCA empowers communities to make informed decisions about their water future.

In many cases, simple steps like managing septic systems, preserving natural shorelines, or safely storing fuel and chemicals, can make a big difference. But these efforts are most effective when they are coordinated and grounded in local knowledge.

FOCA supports lake associations in becoming leaders in water stewardship by helping them collect and share data, assess risks, and advocate for stronger protections. Ultimately, protecting source water isn't just a technical or regulatory challenge; it's a shared responsibility.

Everyone has a role to play in keeping our lakes, rivers, and groundwater clean. And by working together, rural and lakefront communities can build a strong foundation for safe drinking water, now and for future generations.

To learn about how FOCA is helping protect Ontario's source water, visit foca.on.ca/source-water-protection/.

Prevent the Spread of Invasive Species

We all have a role to play in preventing the spread of invasive species on our boating equipment because watercraft are a significant potential carrier of invasives.

Since 2022, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources has regulated the movement of all watercraft—boats, canoes, kayaks, and so forth—under the *Invasive Species Act, 2015*.

It is now the law in Ontario to clean and drain your boat, trailer, and gear before moving to a new waterbody. Boaters need to take action to look for and remove plants or other invasive ‘hitchhikers’ before moving between waterbodies.

Ontario’s regulations allow us to better prevent and slow the destructive spread of invasives. Please be part of the solution for waterfront Ontario!

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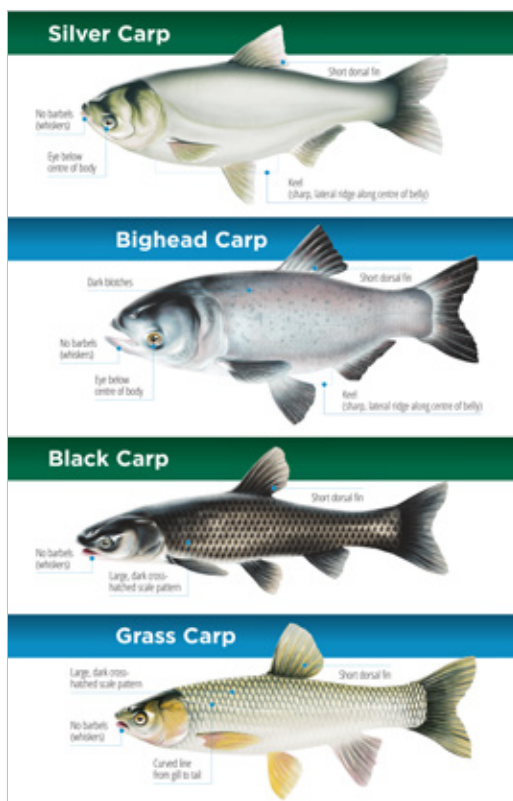
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Get links to the Ministry’s “Boaters action plan” and learn more on our webpage: foca.on.ca/invasive-species/.



Learn How to ID Invasive Carps

Although not yet established, if invasive carps invade the Great Lakes they will have detrimental effects on the commercial and sport fishing industries, recreational boating, and tourism across Ontario.

Invasive carps consume an enormous amount of food that other species rely on, therefore displacing native fishes and other important aquatic species like waterfowl.

Please be our eyes on the Great Lakes this year!

Learn how to identify invasive carps, and report sightings or captures online at eddmaps.org or call the Invading Species Hotline: 1-800-563-7711.

Get important links and details on FOCA’s website: foca.on.ca/carps.

Be a 'Phrag' Fighter

Ontario's lakes are the heart of cottage country, but shorelines at our favourite places to swim, fish, paddle, and unwind are being overtaken by an aggressive invasive plant.

Phragmites australis (or 'Phrag') forms dense stands that block water access, crowd out native plants, and damage habitat for wildlife and recreation alike. In many parts of Ontario cottage country, it has become one of the biggest threats to enjoying the lake.

Phragmites is referred to as one of Canada's worst invasive plants, rapidly spreading across Ontario's roadsides, wetlands, shorelines, and lake margins. It forms towering stands over five metres tall that crowd out native plants, damage aquatic ecosystems, and overtake beaches — blocking views, limiting water access, and reducing property values. Its dense, slow-decomposing stalks can increase fire risk and create unsafe shoreline conditions while reducing property values. For cottagers and lake visitors, Phragmites disrupts swimming, boating, and fishing, turning diverse wetlands into degraded monocultures.

However, cottage communities are not alone in the fight against Phragmites.



IPCF recipients - Junction Creek Stewardship Committee

The **Ontario Phragmites Action (OPA) program** was created in response to the growing threat of invasive Phragmites. The OPA program is a province-wide initiative that brings together conservation authorities, municipalities, Indigenous communities, environmental organizations, and local volunteers to take action on Phragmites. OPA focuses on coordinated action, collaboration, and education. Since Phragmites does not respect property lines, the program emphasizes working across jurisdictions to create effective, long-term solutions.

Thanks to an investment from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, OPA supports control efforts by developing resources to manage Phragmites, offering free DNA screening for eligible Phragmites stands, and providing funding for municipalities, community groups, Indigenous communities, and others through the grant program: the **Invasive Phragmites Control Fund (IPCF)**.

You do not need to be a Phragmites manager to do your part because prevention is just as important as control. OPA provides resources to help you identify invasive Phragmites. You are encouraged to report suspected sightings through digital platforms like EDDMapS.

OPA also works to reduce the unintentional spread of Phragmites through human activity. Boats, trailers, and ATVs can transport seeds or plant fragments between waterbodies and other habitats. Cottage country residents and visitors can support prevention efforts by cleaning equipment before moving between sites, and by avoiding the use of Phragmites plants in landscaping, erosion control, or hunting blinds.

By working together, we can help protect our lakes from the threat of invasive Phragmites.

To learn more about OPA or to get involved in local efforts, please visit: ontariophragmitesaction.ca.



Images courtesy Kaleigh Mooney

Hope for Native Wetland Plants: Results of Hand-Cutting Phragmites

by Meghan Ward

In the fight against invasive Phragmites australis at Point Pelee National Park, a team of researchers and conservation staff, Trent University, and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources took action starting in 2020.

Since herbicides are generally prohibited over water in Canada's national parks, the team took the hard route, cutting Phragmites stems below the waterline and manually burning the stalks afterward. This was back-breaking work — more than 380 hours over 10 weeks — but two years later, the results from the treated area are in, and they are hopeful.

The treated wetland at Point Pelee showed remarkable ecological recovery. Before and after images can be seen on the facing page.

Here are some highlights of what was found, two years after manual Phragmites removal:

- The treated site had nearly double the number of plant species (14) compared to the invaded site (7 species), suggesting that native plants were able to re-establish themselves once the invasive reed was removed.
- Phragmites stem density was drastically reduced from over 70 stems per square metre in the invaded area, to fewer than 5 stems per square metre in the treated wetland.
- Native plant cover rebounded significantly with over 93% of the ground in the treated area showing non-Phragmites vegetation, closely mirroring coverage in a nearby reference wetland that had never been invaded. In contrast, the Phragmites-invaded area had only 53% native plant cover.
- The types of plants in the treated area — including buttonbush, cattails, duckweed, yellow water lily, and swamp loosestrife — closely resembled those found in the healthy, never-invaded wetland, in contrast to the monoculture of Phragmites seen in the untreated site.
- Notably, the treated wetland also showed the greatest diversity among its plots, a positive indicator of ecological resilience and habitat quality.

Overall, these findings suggest that native vegetation can recover robustly — and quickly — when invasive Phragmites is effectively removed, even using low-tech, manual methods and without reseeding or planting.

FOCA met Meagan at the Ontario Biodiversity Summit in May 2025. Congratulations, Meagan, on receiving the **People's Choice Student Poster Award** there! The abstract to Meagan's paper can be reached from a link on FOCA's webpage: foca.on.ca/phragmites/.



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What could this mean for your waterfront?

Although many shoreline and wetland areas across southern Ontario are battling Phragmites, this study suggests that, with effort and the right timing, even small-scale, manual removal can help restore the natural beauty and biodiversity of precious wetlands. That means more space for frogs, fish, birds — and the peaceful wild spaces we all love.

Of course, Phragmites doesn't go away after just one cut. Continued monitoring and spot-removal are required to prevent reestablishment over time.

But this study sends a clear message: fighting back against invasive species is worth it, and our wetlands can recover.



Top: invaded site with Meghan Ward wading through dense Phragmites growth before treatment.

Bottom: state of biodiversity recovery in 2023 at a treated site previously invaded by Phragmites.

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FireSmart starts at the Cottage!

There are many actions cottagers can take to help increase their resilience to wildland fires.

It starts with a simple home assessment, which can be done by residents through **FireSmart Begins at Home** (available at the Apple App Store or Google Play) or the FireSmart Home Assessment document (available at [FireSmartCanada.ca](https://firesmartcanada.ca)).

Using knowledge gained through your home assessment, actions taken in the immediate area around your structures will have the biggest impact to safeguarding your cottage. Actions you may take include:

- Creating a non-combustible zone up to **1.5 metres** around your home and deck.
- Removing combustible materials from under your deck.
- Reducing shrubs, conifer trees and dead material within **10 metres** of structures.
- Converting to fire-resistant plants and replacing highly flammable conifers such as Cedar and Spruce trees within **10 metres** of structures.
- Thinning and pruning conifer trees within **10-30 metres** of your buildings.
- Ensuring power lines are clear of tree limbs.
- Residents should consult municipal bylaws prior to completing any vegetation management on their property.

Interested in adopting FireSmart principles on your property? There's a free one-hour FireSmart 101 course is available at [FireSmartCanada.ca](https://firesmartcanada.ca).

Wildfire Community Preparedness Day — Apply for a Grant

Wildfire Community Preparedness Day is the first Saturday in May, but residents are encouraged to **come together any time between May and October to host events** and work on projects that raise awareness of wildland fire risks and to increase their resilience. Residents, organizations or groups can **apply between November 1st and January 31st for a \$500 grant towards their Preparedness Day event**. Last year 404 neighbourhoods were awarded this grant, and we'd love to see that number continue to rise in 2026!



Neighbourhood Recognition Program

FireSmart Canada's Neighbourhood Recognition Program is a national program developed to **officially recognize neighbourhoods** that have taken critical steps in reducing their vulnerability to wildland fires. Neighbourhoods and subdivisions can **apply between November 1 and February 28** to become FireSmart Recognized Neighbourhoods. Visit [FireSmartCanada.ca](https://firesmartcanada.ca) and the NPR portal for details and criteria and incentives.

How to Report Wildland Fires

If you do encounter smoke or flames in a wildland area, take note of how to report it:

- If the fire is located south of the Mattawa and French Rivers, **call 911** to report a wildland fire.
- If the fire is located north of these rivers, report it by **calling 310-FIRE** (no area code is needed).

Know the fire hazard near you by consulting the interactive fire map at ontario.ca/forestfire.

Campfires

Help us reduce the risk of wildland fires this season by keeping safe campfire practices in mind. Whether you're planning to roast marshmallows in the back yard, prepare a shore lunch, or simply stay warm on an overnight trip, follow these tips:

- Build the fire on **bare soil or rock in a location sheltered from the wind**.
- Make sure the fire is a **safe distance from all flammable material**, including overhanging branches.
- Keep the fire **small and never leave it unattended**.
- **Put out the fire when you are done**. Soak it with water, stir the ashes and soak it again. Repeat until the ashes are cold to the touch.

Flying drones or UAV around forest fires is dangerous and illegal.

When you fly a drone near a forest fire, you can put the lives of pilots, firefighters and other emergency service personnel at risk. **The 'no drone zone' is any area within nine kilometres of any forest fire.** Before you fly your drone, make sure you understand the rules and regulations.

Drone pilots must follow the rules in the Canadian Aviation Regulations (CARs). Visit Transport Canada's drone safety site (tc.canada.ca/en/aviation/drone-safety/learn-rules-you-fly-your-drone/flying-your-drone-safely-legally) to learn about:

- drone safety
- legal requirements
- regulations
- penalties.

Remember, you are the pilot of your drone. Be safe and stay clear of forest fires.

Watch for Waterbombers

When you are out enjoying Ontario's waterways this season, remember that waterbombers need room to scoop water from lakes.

Boaters who venture too close can obstruct fire-fighting efforts and create a dangerous situation for themselves and pilots.

Waterbombers will not scoop from a lake or river if encroaching watercraft pose a safety hazard. Help fight wildland fires by staying clear of waterbombers while out on the water.

We are so lucky to be surrounded by this incredible natural landscape, so let's do all we can to keep it safe from wildland fires this fire season.

Share these tips with your neighbours and families, and don't forget to explore the full set of fire prevention tips by visiting Ontario.ca/fireprevention.



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Water Management Planning: A Case Study of Local Action

by Michelle Lewin, FOCA

In Renfrew County in eastern Ontario, FOCA members on Round Lake and Golden Lake are impacted by water flows from the Bonnechere River.

After significant flood events that negatively affected local properties with extensive shoreline and building damage, considerable effort and consultation with local stakeholders led to an amendment of the **water management plan (WMP)**.

This summary is offered as an inspiration to fellow FOCA members across the province who may share similar issues that need collaborative solutions, or who have questions about local water level fluctuations in areas where waterpower facilities function. FOCA members are invited to login on our website for the full Case Study: foca.on.ca/water-levels/#case-study.

A key takeaway: it takes a community to make positive change. Also, change takes time, as well as ongoing perseverance, communication, and education!

This is a good-news story about the efforts of FOCA member group, the Round Lake Property Owners Association, together with the support of the Golden Lake (now 'Bonnechere River') Property Owners Association, the Lake Clear Property Owners Association, local power generators, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), and local municipal partners.

Water Management on the System

There are currently four waterpower companies in the Bonnechere River watershed, including private companies and Renfrew Power Generation (RPG) which is owned by the Corporation of the Town of Renfrew.

Although there has been a waterpower plan in the area since 1901, a Bonnechere River WMP was first implemented in 2004 for a 10-year period. The WMP set out legally enforceable provisions for the management of water flows and levels on the river, while recognizing that the WMP could still be temporarily overridden in cases of emergency as determined by the MNR, dam operators, police or other emergency organizations.

Renfrew Power Generation's Shawn Cameron, who has many years of experience on the system, explained that water can back up quickly with 27 tributaries into Golden Lake alone, and only two of them controlled by dams.

A bathymetry study confirmed that the landscape of the river bottom creates a hold-back zone before the dam, and snow sampling in Algonquin Park can provide some distant early warnings of the spring freshet to come, but weather events can't be prevented, even if they can be predicted. The system only has so much capacity.

Floods, Frustrations, and Community Resilience

In 2008, Round and Golden Lakes experienced flooding, followed by significant flooding issues in the spring of 2017 and again in 2019. There were calls for changes to the WMP; in response, a **Public Advisory Committee (PAC)** was struck.

Rob Norris of the Round Lake Property Owners Association remembers he met with the Director of the MNR's Pembroke office, and participated in further discussions with RPG, to encourage consideration of solutions that would lower the water levels in spring to prevent future flooding.



Round Lake Flooding (Mike Parsons) courtesy of the RLPOA.

In 2004 the new WMP plan imposed a lower limit to the drawdown of Round Lake to protect trout spawning beds in the area. In an effort to eliminate this lower limit, a lake trout study was undertaken to confirm that an amendment to the WMP could protect lake trout alongside people. In 2017, Janice Visneskie, the Mayor of Killaloe, Hagarty and Richards submitted an amendment to the WMP, and a series of meetings with stakeholders were held. Principles guiding the amendment to the plan included ecosystem impacts — such as fish habitat and spawning sites, areas with erosion potential, and existing minimum flow requirements — as well as a balanced provision of water to all users on the system including shoreline property owners, municipal facilities, and waterpower producers.

Shawn Cameron of RPG recalls that 2017 was an unprecedented year for high water. There had been lots of winter snow, plus a fast spring melt, and then heavy rain. With the system's headwaters in Algonquin Park — well beyond local control — and steep shoreline banks adding to the challenges, it was a perfect storm, so to speak.

Many have credited Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke's longtime MPP, John Yakabuski, along with Mayor Visneskie for their roles in pulling together stakeholders in 2019 to review the issues once more. A proposed amendment to the WMP was brought forward from these community discussions and was finally implemented for the 2021 spring freshet.

Public Consultation & Ongoing Education

Public consultation was an important part of the process from 2001 onward. In particular, the PAC was officially recognized as deserving of, "a great deal of credit for the success of the effort and for the quality of the final product." This was a group — a community — effort.

Education is key, said Shawn. It helps to be able to show residents the historical flow charts and to demonstrate how rarely the system is outside the defined parameters. RPG maintains public-facing graphs of water levels and sometimes even more frequent updates during the unpredictable annual freshet. The new operating regime has been designed to minimize the potential for ice damage during spring thaw, while protecting overwintering turtles and native lake trout spawning.

Local residents thank RPG for their ongoing reporting and communications. There is a sense that everyone is working as a team on a common goal, as much as possible. It was noted that communication has improved immensely since the flood events.

The trade-off in this case is a slightly shorter boating season, as the water draw-down happens in September now. "We take some flack for that," noted Shawn, but ultimately, it's part of the solution to having less water left in the system over the winter and to be ready for spring freshet.

It is a continuous process of educating new residents and municipal partners who didn't experience the previous years of flooding and might lobby for an extension to the boat season into October again, without understanding how much work it takes to get the water levels right. Rob points out that it is important for the PAC to keep meeting calmly and proactively in the 'good' years, not just the 'bad'.

Ultimately, some things are beyond anyone's power when the water volume in the system changes quickly. Understanding system limitations is a key part of ongoing communications. "We can't fix flooding," noted Shawn, "but through collaboration, we believe we have reduced its frequency and severity."

Final Thoughts

Seasonal high and low water levels are the result of natural processes and weather events which cannot be entirely eliminated through the implementation of any WMP. There will still be times of flooding, but hopefully the steps that have been taken on the Bonnechere River will serve the community well into the future.

What's most gratifying for Rob when he considers all the hard work it took to get to the point where they are today with the WMP?

"In the flood years, I remember being out in early June sandbagging with neighbours, just trying to save people's properties," Rob recalled. "This year, it's June and instead we're all putting in our docks and getting our boats ready!"

That's a win.

Respect the Water: It Doesn't Give Second Chances

by Sgt. Dave Moffatt, Ontario Provincial Police
– Provincial Marine Coordinator

I know I was one of the lucky ones.

Growing up in the Greater Toronto Area, I had the privilege of spending weekends and summers at our family cottage. As a young boy, those days were filled with everything cottage life had to offer including swimming, boating, and exploring the waters of Lake Muskoka.

As I got older, that cottage turned into my summer home. I worked in the local tourism industry and lived in our boathouse. I had a small boat with a 90-horsepower engine, which got me to and from my minimum wage jobs every day.

I wasn't making a lot of money, but back then, I felt like the luckiest guy alive. The freedom, the lake, the lifestyle; it was something special, even if it didn't last forever.

Back then, the rules around boating weren't as strict or well known as they are today. The one thing I **did** know was that I had to have a lifejacket or personal flotation device (PFD) on board the boat. And I did — tucked away up in the bow, far from 'easily accessible,' but technically, it was there.

Being on the water felt like second nature for me. It was a way of life.



I never once thought something could go wrong. But years later, after becoming a police officer with the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) in the mid-1990s, everything changed.

When I was posted to the Bracebridge Detachment, I joined the OPP Marine Program. What started as a way to combine my love for the water with policing quickly became a passion for educating others about marine safety. The job was busy with constant patrols, engaging with boaters, and ensuring compliance.

But unfortunately, alongside all that also came tragedy.

I responded to countless incidents — too many — that ended in the loss of life. These were lives lost on the same lakes and rivers meant for relaxation and joy.

That's when I learned one of the most important lessons of my career:

Respect the water. It can take your life in seconds. Always wear a lifejacket or PFD.

Yes, as an OPP officer, it was mandatory for me to wear a lifejacket while on duty. But it didn't take long before it became second nature, like putting on a seatbelt in a car. Being on a boat without one just didn't feel right anymore, and that mindset has stayed with me to this day.

In the past 13 years alone, over 335 people have died in marine-related incidents on waterways patrolled by the OPP. **Eighty-six percent** of those deaths were due to drowning because the **victims weren't wearing a lifejacket or PFD.**

Even more telling: 87% of those total fatalities involved small watercraft like canoes, kayaks, and small motorboats, where people fall overboard or are in a vessel that capsizes.

The common thread? They all entered the water involuntarily — and weren't wearing the protection they needed in the moment.



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As a police officer who understands how critical lifejackets and PFDs are, I make a point during my patrols to talk with boaters about their choices. When I ask why they're not wearing one, I hear all kinds of responses, like:

- "My cottage is just over there."
- "I never have, and I'm not starting now."
- "I'm a strong swimmer."
- "I'm not required to wear one."

These reasons may seem valid in the moment, but what many don't realize is how quickly things can go wrong. When someone falls into water unexpectedly, the body often reacts with an involuntary gasp — and that single moment can be deadly. Even the strongest swimmers can be caught off guard, and in that situation, your swimming ability might not be enough.

A lifejacket or PFD doesn't just help you float; it gives you a fighting chance when the unexpected happens. It's a simple choice that can mean the difference between life and death.

Lifejackets have come a long way since the days of bulky, uncomfortable gear. Today, modern options include lightweight, sleek, and even automatic inflatable models that deploy the moment they detect water. These are designed to be worn — not stored. There are PFDs tailored to every activity: kayaking, canoeing, paddleboarding, sailing, and just enjoying a leisurely day on the lake. Whatever you do on the water, there's one made just for you.

I said earlier that I was one of the lucky ones, and I still believe that. But it wasn't just luck. It was a deep respect for the water that I developed early, and a commitment I've carried into my personal life and professional career. I make sure that my family, friends, and loved ones are always protected when they're out on the water.

Because I've seen, firsthand, how quickly things can go wrong. I've stood at the shoreline with grieving families, knowing a simple decision — wearing a lifejacket — could have changed everything.

So, from one experienced officer to you:
Find a lifejacket or PFD that fits your activity and wear it — every time. It might just save your life.

FOCA's Role & Your Member Login



Throughout this magazine, you will find links to pages of the FOCA website with additional information; however, many of these resources are behind the 'members-only' login.

Every 'Friend of FOCA' and members of our Member Associations can create unique login accounts to access members-only materials on the FOCA website, including publications and the access codes for offers described here: foca.on.ca/benefits. Your association renewal contact has a link (unique to your association) for you to use to set up your own Username and Password as a Sub-Account.

FOCA is the **only** go-to provincial advocacy organization committed to sustaining and enhancing the Ontario cottage experience. We work collaboratively to identify and address key issues by providing credible expertise, environmental stewardship, targeted programs and services, and a robust network of strategic partners.

Since 1963, FOCA has been the voice of the Ontario waterfront. Today, our members are more than 550 lake and road associations across the province, and the permanent and seasonal residents they represent. In the face of increasing challenges, our purpose is to empower dedicated stewardship of our lands, lakes and rivers, while protecting Ontario's cottage culture, heritage and way of life.

Your membership fuels this work. It strengthens our credibility, expands our reach, and reinforces the message that Ontario's 250,000 waterfront families are paying attention and care deeply. Without your support, that voice weakens. With it, we shape the future — together.

Support our movement by joining us, donating, subscribing to our newsletter, and following our social channels.

Take action today and make a difference for all road, cottage, camp, and waterfront property owners. foca.on.ca



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