

Conservation authorities managing impacts from increased flooding

Conservation authorities are encouraged by a report released recently by Ontario's Environmental Commissioner Gord Miller which highlights the need for additional investment in conservation authority flood programs in order to address the growing threat from extreme weather.

The report, entitled *Looking for Leadership: The Costs of Climate Inaction*, points out that not taking action today to reduce carbon emissions and manage the flooding impacts from extreme weather will be even more expensive to manage in the future, creating significant public safety, environmental and economic implications.

"We're very pleased that the Commissioner draws attention to areas within conservation authority flood management programs that need to be immediately addressed in order to continue to protect people and property," said Kim Gavine, general manager of Conservation Ontario, the association that represents Ontario's 36 conservation authorities.

Conservation authority programs help the Province meet its climate change adaptation objectives, specifically in areas such as flood management, stormwater runoff and water quality improvement. However, conservation authority flood management programs require significant attention in order to continue to be effective against more frequent and greater flood events.

"Conservation authorities are on the frontlines in dealing with the consequences of extreme weather across the province," Gavine said.

Miller pointed out in this report that outdated floodplain mapping, aging infrastructure, and stressed operations hinder conservation authorities' ability to continue to protect people and property from the impacts of extreme weather.

To flag their concerns around conservation authority flood management programs, Conservation Ontario worked with its members to develop a Flood Business Case (*Dodging the Perfect Storm*, September 2013). A number of specific targets are identified that require immediate and long-term attention, including the updating of floodplain mapping; investing in conservation authority flood operations, including monitoring programs; addressing aging infrastructure - particularly in rural areas (conservation authorities operate 900 dams, dykes, channels and erosion control structures along rivers and shorelines with a replacement value of \$2.9 billion); developing an asset management strategy; and supporting ongoing investments in programs such as green infrastructure, watershed management, and stewardship to build local resiliency against stormwater impacts.

"We're still in discussions with the Province on this business case, but there are many competing funding needs," Gavine said.

Flood management is a shared provincial and local government responsibility in Ontario, with conservation authorities playing a significant role in protecting people and property from flooding.

Conservation authorities are partners in the Provincial Flood Forecasting and Warning program and provide services such as flood monitoring, forecasting, and warning, and regulation of building in floodplains and other hazardous areas.

They also contribute to municipal emergency planning and preparedness activities, provide planning support and advice to municipalities to minimize flood impacts, and inform the public about flood safety. In addition, they work with the Province and other agencies developing and implementing many projects and programs that contribute to the Province's climate change adaptation efforts in Ontario. These programs include flood management, source protection, watershed stewardship, watershed management, monitoring and reporting.

"Conservation authorities are unique to Ontario and in addition to flood protection bring added benefits through watershed planning, watershed stewardship, promotion of green infrastructure and many other programs," said Gavine. "They enable the Province and municipalities to use a cost effective and streamlined approach to flood management and as climate change impacts continue to increase, these efforts will become even more critical."

This work contributes to build resiliency within Ontario's watersheds and has the added benefit of improving conditions in the Great Lakes which are also feeling the impacts of climate change.