

News Release

For Immediate Release

March 31, 2025

Ontario's Non-municipal Drinking-Water Needs Better Oversight and Support

(Toronto) Nearly 3 million Ontario residents (almost 20% of the population), as well as many businesses and other facilities, rely on non-municipal drinking-water supplies for drinking, preparing food, and bathing. While over 98% of all samples tested from non-municipal drinking-water systems over the past decade have met the Ontario Drinking Water Quality Standards, not all water is sampled and tested. "A lack of testing can expose Ontarians to risks", says Auditor General Shelley Spence in a special report tabled today in the Legislature.

Owners of non-municipal drinking-water systems, including those regulated by the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) or the Ministry of Health (MOH), are required to sample their drinking water at a prescribed frequency for testing. However, private wells and surface water intakes that serve five or fewer residences, which are not considered to be drinking-water systems, have no testing requirements and are not included in this 98%. Drinking-water systems that do have testing requirements are generally not required to test for all contaminants. In addition, not all system owners test their water as required.

The audit report contains 17 recommendations from the Office of the Auditor General, for implementation by the two ministries, and the public health entities they oversee that are involved in the oversight of non-municipal drinking water.

The audit found that:

- Some small drinking-water systems have not been identified, assessed and inspected by Public Health Units (PHUs) overseen by MOH, posing a public health risk. These types of non-municipal systems serve six or more seasonal residences or a public facility, such as a hotel, restaurant or church.
- Many owners of small drinking-water systems did not sample their water as required, and PHUs rarely enforced compliance – 56% of the 1,660 systems reviewed missed at least one test sample in the past five years.
- MECP has effective processes to monitor and enforce compliance with sampling requirements of the non-municipal drinking-water systems that it regulates, but lacks the capacity to regularly inspect all 1,816 of these systems – 34% had not been inspected in over five years; 9% had not been inspected in over seven years.
- Studies indicate that less than one-third of the 1.3 million Ontarians that get their water from private wells test their drinking water. Of those who do test their water, 35% of samples test positive for indicators of bacterial contamination.
- MECP does not review well records for completeness and accuracy or for compliance with well construction requirements – of 195,232 well records submitted to MECP over the past 10 years, 54,931 were missing information about well usage, and 73,800 records were not fully processed as of August 2024.

- Potentially hundreds of thousands of abandoned wells have never been properly decommissioned, which can create a pathway for contaminants to enter groundwater and contaminate drinking-water sources.
- MECP has not fully assessed the feasibility of applying source water protection to non-municipal sources.

Spence added, “The United Nations recognizes access to safe water as a basic human right and one of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals adopted by world leaders in 2015. Contaminated drinking water can cause gastrointestinal illnesses and other potentially serious health effects, which may result in significant economic costs due to hospitalizations, doctor visits, lost work days and other related costs. As demonstrated by the Walkerton crisis, the consequences of Ontarians drinking unsafe water can be deadly.”

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For more information, please contact:

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From:

Jim Hunt, Chair and Keith Taylor, Program Manager
Trent Conservation Coalition Source Protection Region
714 Murray St, R.R. #1, Trenton, Ont. K8V 0N1

April 10, 2025

Subject: Concern over Ontario College Science Based Programs

To:

Hon. Paul Calandra, Minister Education
Hon. David Piccini, Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development
Hon. Todd McCarthy, Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks

Dear Ministers Calandra, Piccini and McCarthy

At a recent Trent Conservation Coalition Source Protection Committee Meeting, a discussion took place about the cuts to college programs in the province. The discussion focussed on the impact of potential cuts in the science programs including courses for water technicians. These programs are critical to support water treatment plants, sewage treatment plants and water quality monitoring programs.

Ontario has adopted the multi barrier approach to providing safe municipal drinking water across the province. While our Source Protection Committee's primary focus is protecting source of drinking water, as the first barrier, we are also concerned that the remaining barriers are functioning and are well supported.

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World class testing and monitoring programs in water treatment plants not only allow the treatment process to adjust to fluctuations in raw water quality but also makes certain that the water leaving the plant is safe for human consumption. This takes a well educated and skilled workforce to ensure this high standard of municipal water.

Our source protection region is the largest in the province, but many of our municipal drinking water systems are relatively small. This can lead to staffing challenges, particularly when the current trend in smaller municipalities is for high staff turnover. To fill vacant positions, it is critical to have an abundance of college graduates from environmental and water technician courses.

As this concern over environmental education is related to the mandates of your Ministries, our committee wanted me to write this letter to encourage your three Ministries to work together to ensure that vital water technician courses are supported and enhanced to meet the critical demands across the province. We believe that it is vitally important to match college courses with work force requirements.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely

Jim Hunt, Chair and Keith Taylor, Program Manager
Trent Conservation Coalition Source Protection Region

C/O LOWER TRENT CONSERVATION
714 Murray St, R.R. #1, Trenton, Ont. K8V 0N1

May 1, 2025

AA-011-25

Via e-mail: todd.mccarthy@pc.ola.org

The Honourable Todd McCarthy
Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks
777 Bay Street, 5th Floor
Toronto, ON, M7A 2J3

RE: Auditor General of Ontario Special Report 2025 “Safety of Non-Municipal Drinking Water”

Dear Minister McCarthy:

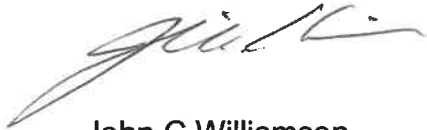
The Cataraqui Source Protection Committee reviewed this special report at our April 3rd meeting. As a report, it was well received and addressed several key issues that the Committee has been urging your Ministry to address in order to provide protection to the sources of drinking water to the many residents of Ontario that are not protected by the current program. We were pleased to read that both your Ministry and the Ministry of Health have committed to implementing all of the recommendations in the report.

What was missing, however; was a date by which these recommendations would be implemented. The Cataraqui Source Protection Committee passed a motion directing me to write to you on their behalf and request that your Ministry address this missing piece. They request that your Ministry commit to implementing these recommendations in 2025 which fits with the 25th anniversary of the Walkerton crisis. In the opinion of the Source Protection Committee, adding more protection for the more vulnerable of society such as rural schools and rural senior residences/nursing homes as per recommendation #15 would be a great place to start. In the meantime, while working on these; the current methodology to protect sources for municipal drinking water should be applied to these vulnerable situations.

The Committee also commends the commitment to work with your partners in other Ministries and Public Health to strengthen the safety of non-municipal drinking water and to implement all of the report’s recommendations.

The Committee is pleased to work with your and other Ministries to assist in implementing these recommendations.

Yours truly,



John C Williamson
Chair, Cataraqui Source Protection Committee

CC: Paul Proderick, Chair, Cataraqui Source Protection Authority



May 17, 2025

Via Email: specialeconomiczones@ontario.ca

Re: Conservation Ontario's comments on the "Special Economic Zones Act, 2025" (ERO#025-0391)

Bill 5, the *Protect Ontario by Unleashing our Economy Act, 2025* proposes to amend existing and enact new legislation, including the *Special Economic Zones Act, 2025*. Upon proclamation, the *Special Economic Zones Act* will provide regulation-making authorities to the Lieutenant Governor in Council (LGIC) and applicable Minister to make criteria for and to designate "special economic zones", "trusted proponents", and "designated projects".

Once established, designated projects undertaken by trusted proponents in special economic zones may receive exemptions or modifications to specified legislative or regulatory permitting, approvals, or other similar requirements. The proposed legislation may apply in any area of Ontario, and to any provincial Act, regulation or instrument, including municipal by-laws.

Conservation Ontario and the 36 Conservation Authorities (CAs) share the government's commitment to identify process improvements and provide timely approvals to support development priorities. We are committed to supporting a strong provincial economy, safe housing and critical infrastructure development, and safeguarding sources of municipal drinking water. CAs are dedicated to providing client service excellence for all development proponents.

Providing strong protections for people and property from risks related to natural hazards and existing and future sources of municipal drinking water are essential to support economic development and safe and prosperous communities. Conservation Ontario recommends that natural hazard permitting requirements under the *Conservation Authorities Act* and policies set out in the source protection plan under the *Clean Water Act* continue to apply in any designated special economic zones. The continued application of these regulations and policies will balance potential risks and further support safe and healthy communities.

Ontario's natural hazard regulatory framework is essential to protect housing, critical infrastructure, and the public from natural hazard impacts, including flooding and erosion. The success of Ontario's hazard management framework and the Conservation Authority

model is recognized for minimizing flood hazard risks to housing compared to other provinces, resulting in considerably lower insurable losses. This coordinated and hazard/risk-based framework is strongly supported by Ontario's Special Advisor on Flooding in their report "*An Independent Review of the 2019 Flood Events in Ontario*".

Conservation Authorities play a critical role in the protection of sources of municipal drinking water as Source Protection Authorities (SPAs) under the *Clean Water Act*. Lead SPAs are responsible for developing, updating and assisting in the coordination and implementation of the source protection plan(s) to protect existing and future sources of drinking water. All Source Protection Plans are approved by the Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks.

The *Clean Water Act* appropriately establishes a high standard for the protection of drinking water quality and quantity and requires that in case of conflict between a provision of that Act and another Act or regulation, that the provision that provides the greatest protection to the quality and quantity of the water prevails. Maintaining this requirement under the *Clean Water Act* is necessary to ensure the strongest available legislative and regulatory protection is applied to safeguard drinking water quantity and quality. This multi-barrier approach to ensuring the safety of Ontario's drinking water was strongly supported by Commissioner O'Connor in the 2002 "*Report of the Walkerton Inquiry*".

Conservation Authority staff bring decades of specialized expertise balancing development pressures and finding local solutions to complex matters. Both Conservation Ontario and Ontario's 36 CAs welcome opportunities to strategically collaborate with provincial and municipal governments to ensure provincial development priorities are planned and implemented safely, supporting long-term economic prosperity and a healthy environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to review and provide comments on the "Special Economic Zones Act, 2025" (ERO#025-0391). We would be pleased to further discuss these comments at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Dave Barton

Dave Barton
Chair, Conservation Ontario

Angela Coleman

Angela Coleman
Chief Administrative Officer / General
Manager, Conservation Ontario

c.c. All CA CAOs/GMs