



Our Future to Shape – A Way Forward



“Working Together For A Healthy Environment”

November, 2016

Introduction

The St. Clair Region Conservation Authority developed a strategic plan to guide our activities over the next 5 years. Since our inception in 1961, our programs have continued to evolve to reflect changing priorities of our watershed. Over the years, we have developed a culture of “success through partnerships.” We are stronger and can accomplish so much more when we align ourselves with others with similar goals. These partnerships have allowed us to be opportunistic in bringing talent and funding to our region to help us build healthier and more resilient watersheds.

As you read through *A Way Forward*, you will notice strong connections between programs. Projects that help species at risk can also reduce flooding, and help protect water quality, which in turn enhances recreation opportunities. Watershed management is about looking at the entire watershed in an integrated way and developing programs that feed off each other to improve overall watershed health.

We have developed strong ties with the municipalities we serve. Through a supportive Board of Directors, our programs continue to reflect local needs and priorities. It is imperative, however, that we continue to re-evaluate our programs to ensure they meet the future needs of our watershed and our municipalities.

Our commitment to provide quality customer service, forged in our history, continues to be championed by our Board of Directors and staff. Continuous improvement, innovation, learning, and sharing our knowledge empower our organization and all our partners in building healthy watersheds. Our ability to maintain and enhance our capabilities necessitates that we advance science; engage and connect with conservation partners, watershed residents, and visitors; innovate; and inspire others. We need to continue to evolve as an organization to remain a trusted watershed leader in the community.

A Way Forward presents a vision and mission and a series of four goals. For each goal, a summary of existing programs and suggested future strategic actions are presented to meet the challenges ahead.

Who Are We?

The St. Clair Region Conservation Authority (SCRCA) was established under the Conservation Authorities Act in 1961 to conserve local renewable natural resources within the watersheds of the region. The SCRCA operates under the direction of a Board of Directors appointed by the municipalities within its jurisdiction.

The jurisdiction of the SCRCA includes the watershed of the Sydenham River and the watersheds of a number of watercourses emptying into Lake Huron, the St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair. The area covers approximately 4,100 km². The St. Clair region includes parts of two counties; Lambton and Middlesex, and the northern portion of the Municipality of Chatham-Kent. We serve 17 municipalities, with a total population of 167,000.



Vision and Mission

Vision

Vision is defined as foresight. The vision of the St. Clair Region Conservation Authority reflects the future desired state of our region.

“A healthy and sustainable natural environment in the St. Clair region.”

Mission

A mission reflects action. In order to achieve our vision, it is necessary to provide leadership, effective management and ongoing communication.

“The St. Clair Region Conservation Authority has as its mission, to provide leadership through coordination of watershed planning, implementation of resource management programs and promotion of conservation awareness, in cooperation with others.”



Goal 1 – Develop and maintain programs that will protect life and property from natural hazards such as flooding and erosion

The SCRCA works in partnership with municipalities to protect life and property through the development and implementation of programs that minimize or prevent the impact of disasters such as flooding and erosion.

What Are We Already Doing?

Flood Warning: The Authority operates a flood warning program designed to warn residents in flood-prone areas. Through a network of 11 stream gauges, 5 snow sampling stations, ice monitoring, and current meteorological data, Authority staff monitor watershed conditions by tracking and updating data on an ongoing basis to scientifically determine short- and long-term trends. Should a flood be imminent, the Municipal Flood Coordinators and the media are advised and officials take appropriate action. In addition to riverine flooding, the Authority issues warnings for damage which may occur from wave action along southern Lake Huron, the St. Clair River, and northeastern Lake St. Clair shorelines.



Municipal Plan Input: The Authority has been delegated the responsibility to represent the provincial interest regarding natural hazards. Natural hazards include floodplains, unstable slopes, shorelines and dynamic beaches. While municipalities encourage valuable development, it is important that new development is located safely out of areas susceptible to potential natural hazards. It is also important that any development that is completed within an area of natural hazard does not endanger adjacent landowners, or other landowners within the system.



Ontario Regulation (O.R. 171/06), Development, Interference with Wetlands and Alterations to Shorelines and Watercourses: To prevent future risk to private landowners and to protect the interests and liability of our member municipalities, O.R. 171/06 requires landowners to obtain permission of the Authority prior to developing within natural hazard areas associated with watercourses and areas susceptible to river or lake shoreline flooding, ravine and shoreline slopes, wetlands, and lands adjacent to wetlands.



Maintenance of Water and Erosion Control Infrastructure: The Authority maintains and operates its flood and erosion control structures. The W. Darcy McKeough Floodway was built to protect the community of Wallaceburg and portions of the former Townships of Chatham and Sombra from severe flooding. Since 1984, the McKeough Floodway has been operated 6 times.



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Strategic Actions

Develop a Climate Change Strategy: Impacts of Climate Change are already becoming evident in the St. Clair watersheds with an increasing frequency of severe weather. The SCRCA should develop a strategy that combines existing programs and develops new programs to build more resilient watersheds able to better withstand weather extremes.

Improve Meteorological Data Acquisition: In order to better report and predict flooding due to severe storms, the SCRCA should expand the ability to collect meteorological data.

Improve Regulation Mapping: The SCRCA should continue to create and/or acquire the best available data to define the components that define regulation limits. Because better elevation data is the core of enhanced regulation mapping, the SCRCA should continue to invest in the creation of a high resolution Digital Elevation Model (DEM). This DEM, together with an updated flood model, will allow for the creation of enhanced floodplain mapping. In addition, better elevation data will facilitate more accurate delineation of erosion hazard areas.

Review Operating Criteria for W. Darcy McKeough Floodway: The operating criteria for operation of the floodway is established under law. A review of this criteria are necessary as more data are available over the last three decades, watershed conditions have evolved over time, and climate change has impacted the frequency and severity of events.



Goal 2 – Protect, manage, and restore our natural systems including woodlands, wetlands, waterways, and lakes

Because what we do on land is reflected in our water and ecosystems, the SCRCA develops and implements programs that protect our land resources and promote watershed stewardship practices that lead to healthy, sustainable communities and industries.

What Are We Already Doing?

Reforestation: The SCRCA plants approximately 60,000 trees each year for private and public landowners. Trees are usually planted as windbreaks or for plantations. Local seeds are collected throughout the watershed and supplied to a nursery who will grow local tree stock for planting. Grants are provided to subsidize the cost of planting for the landowner. For a tree planting project to be successful, maintenance of the trees is essential. The Authority offers a service to provide weed control for newly planted seedlings for three years.

Wetland Creation: Through various granting programs, wetland creation is encouraged on private and public lands. The creation of wetlands not only enhances the health of our watersheds but provides benefits to the landowner such as improved flood storage and reduced soil erosion.

Healthy Watersheds/Stewardship: Through various outreach and granting programs, stewardship projects and Best Management Practices are encouraged on private and public lands for the overall benefit of improved water quality and wildlife and aquatic habitat.

Woodlot Management Services: Qualified forestry staff provide woodlot management and marking services to landowners. Proper silviculture techniques and “Good Forest Practices” are encouraged to ensure the long-term health of the woodlot while meeting the needs of the landowner. The SCRCA has been contracted by the County of Lambton to administer its Woodland Conservation Bylaw.

Water Quality Monitoring: The SCRCA works with Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MOECC) to collect and analyze both surface and ground water samples throughout the region. Using the Provincial Water Quality Monitoring Network (PWQMN) and Provincial Ground Water Monitoring Network (PGMN) the data are shared with many program partners and are used in many ways.



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For example, to develop locally focused Watershed Report Cards, Canadian Environmental Sustainability Indicators (CESI) report on:

- State of the Great Lakes
- Multi-Watershed Nutrient Study (MWNS)
- Rural Stormwater Management Model Project

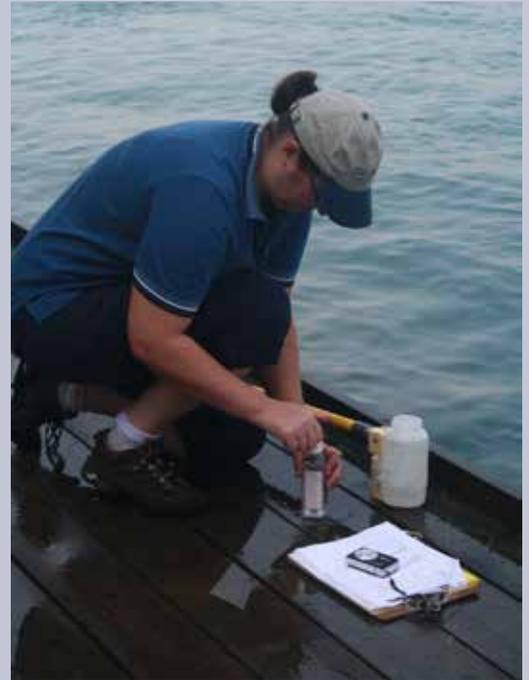
Aquatic Biomonitoring: Aquatic animals such as fish, mussels and benthic macro-invertebrates are used as indicators of the health of local watercourses. The presence or absence of certain pollution sensitive communities can indicate whether or not a river or creek is thriving. This information is collected using provincial and national protocols, and is processed by certified taxonomists. The data are used for watershed reporting, resource management and to target actions to improve and protect habitat conditions.

Ecosystem Recovery Planning: The SCRCA has partnered with organizations to produce Action Plans for ecosystem recovery. Plans exist for the Sydenham River, Lake St. Clair Coastal, and Ausable River - Kettle Point to Pinery. The Sydenham River Recovery Strategy is unique in that it is the first multi-species watershed recovery strategy in Canada. An action plan for Lake Huron Coastal is currently under development.

Reptile Species at Risk: The objective of the Reptiles at Risk Monitoring program is to encourage good stewardship for snakes and turtles in the St. Clair Region. Program activities include tracking occurrences, protecting and improving habitat on Authority and Foundation owned lands, and encouraging local community members to take similar actions.

Wetland Evaluation: The SCRCA works with Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) to evaluate wetlands within the region. This includes determining the locations and significance of wetlands.

Invasive Species: The SCRCA works in partnership with others to help control the spread of certain invasive species such as Phragmites that threaten local ecosystems.



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Drinking Water Source Protection: The St. Clair Region, Upper Thames River, and Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authorities have been working together, along with the Thames-Sydenham and Region Source Protection Committee, to develop a Plan to protect municipal sources of drinking water throughout the region. The Plan has now been approved by the province. While municipalities are responsible to implement the Source Protection Plan, the Conservation Authority will continue to support municipalities in the implementation of the local Source Protection Plan on an as requested contractual basis.

St. Clair River Area of Concern: The St. Clair River Area of Concern (AOC) is one of 43 Areas of Concern the International Joint Commission has identified within the Great Lakes basin where there are known environmental problems. In the St. Clair River AOC, local partners, including the SCRCA, are working together to implement Remedial Action Plans and take action so the area can be rehabilitated and removed from the list of Areas of Concern.

Management of Authority Owned Lands: Through the completion of Property Management Plans, the Authority continues to manage its lands to balance revenue production and effective management of woodlands, wetlands and biodiversity.

Municipal Plan Input and Environmental Assessment Processes: Through service agreements, the Authority cooperates with municipalities to provide recommendations regarding development in or next to natural heritage features to comply with the Provincial Policy Statement, Section 2.1. Natural heritage features include wetlands, woodlands, habitat of threatened and endangered species, and other natural areas. It is important that development does not negatively impact these features, or their ecological functions.



Goal 2 – Protect, manage, and restore our natural systems including woodlands, wetlands, waterways, and lakes

Ontario Regulation 171/06, Development, Interference with Wetlands and Alterations to Shorelines and Watercourses:

Through this regulation, development that impacts a provincially significant wetland is subject to a permit which requires that the development does not adversely affect the hydrologic functions of the wetland.

Municipal Drains: The Conservation Authorities (CA) Act gives the responsibility to Conservation Authorities to regulate activities that change, divert, or interfere in any way with the existing channel of a river, creek, stream or watercourse (including municipal drains) or for changing or interfering in any way with a wetland. Through provincial direction, under the Drainage Act & Section 28 Regulations Team (DART) protocol, the SCRCA provides standard compliance requirements for drain maintenance and repair projects for municipalities. The Drainage Act also has statutory provisions which directly engage the Conservation Authority.



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Strategic Actions

Continue to Develop Streamlined/Efficient Processes: It is always our intent to provide responses for permits, standard compliance requirements, and comments to municipalities in a timely manner. Improvements can always be made and we will work with our partners to ensure our responses are thorough and are provided as quickly as possible.

Support Protection of Natural Heritage Systems: Through collaboration with partner organizations, the SCRCA will provide biological and ecological expertise for natural heritage plans, strategies and policies. The responsibility for natural heritage protection falls to municipalities under The Planning Act. The Conservation Authority can provide ecological and biological expertise to support our member municipalities in satisfying provincial policies.

Develop New Tools to Promote Stewardship Practices and Evaluate the Effectiveness of Best Management Practices: Evaluate the current model of landowner outreach and voluntary stewardship and explore new tools and collaborations that expand conservation opportunities utilizing information from our watershed report cards. Best Management Practices (BMPs) are encouraged to promote soil health, improve water quality, and provide for more resilient watersheds. Efforts need to be made to evaluate the various BMPs to ensure they are creating the results expected such as reducing nutrient loss from farm fields (with a focus on phosphorus) and decreasing sedimentation in watercourses. This is an opportunity to work with colleges and universities, farming groups, and others to develop solid science to evaluate BMP effectiveness.



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Review Aquatic Monitoring Program: Aquatic monitoring informs resource management decisions relating to drain review, planning, and implementing best management practices.

- The current benthic macro-invertebrate monitoring program involves sampling approximately 15 permanent stations annually. Each sample station is used to estimate the health of an entire subwatershed. Additional or rotating stations will be used to augment the existing data to improve our understanding of the health of each subwatershed.
- Fish surveys are entirely fund/grant driven stations and are selected based on existing opportunities. Long-term stations on key locations on the Sydenham River will be established to better assess trends in watershed health over time.
- The water quality monitoring program tracks concentrations of select parameters. Quantity data will be used in order to estimate loading of certain parameters of interest (e.g. nutrients).

Focus on Programs to Reduce Phosphorous Loading into the Great Lakes: Governments on both sides of the border have been taking action setting targets for the Great Lakes to deal with the problem of excess Phosphorus. Stewardship programs, while also addressing other watershed needs, should focus on reducing Phosphorous levels entering the Great Lakes.



Goal 3 – Provide recreation and education opportunities for the public to enjoy and learn from our natural environment

Through the lands we manage and own, as well as the educational programs we deliver, the SCRCA provides opportunities for our communities to understand and appreciate the value of their natural environment as well as the social and economic benefits of protecting that environment.

What Are We Already Doing?

Conservation Lands: The St. Clair Region Conservation Authority and its Foundation own more than 2,100 hectares of land including beaches along Lake Huron, campgrounds, day use parks, wetlands, forests, floodplains, and farmland. A wide range of recreation activities are available on these lands including swimming, boating, hiking, bird watching, camping, fishing, and hunting.



Community Conservation: The SCRCA engages the community in a number of conservation activities including tree planting, biological monitoring, special events, and education. The Conservation Authority develops educational information such as fact sheets, watershed reports cards, and brochures to engage the public regarding conservation issues. We participate at local events, festivals, and conferences allowing for interaction with landowners. We participate with various groups and associations which provides ongoing dialogue over common issues.



Conservation Education: Over 25 programs have been developed to introduce students to nature and to empower them to make a difference. These programs are designed to create an enthusiasm for our natural heritage which will carry over into the student's adult life. The Authority offers outdoor and in-class programs. Many of the education programs are supported by donations from businesses and organizations.

Community Recognition: The SCRCA recognizes groups and individuals in the community through its Conservation Award and Scholarship programs.



Watershed Report Cards: In order to communicate the environmental state of forest cover and water quality of our watersheds, we develop and distribute watershed report cards.

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Strategic Actions

Develop Comprehensive Social Media Presence: Perhaps the greatest value of social media is the ability to foster and engage with a broader audience. That engagement is at the heart of social media. In addition to responsive communication, we can begin to build relationships with the public beyond those that happen during normal transactions. These relationships are what keep people coming back, increasing both loyalty and retention. If these people become advocates, we can increase our reach and presence in the watershed.



Create Additional Conservation Education Opportunities for High Schools: Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSM) let students focus on a career path that matches their skills and interests while meeting the requirements of the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). By providing programs that meet the requirements for SHSM designation, the Authority can expand its conservation education program more fully into high schools, reaching this important demographic.



Expand Engagement with our First Nation Neighbours: The SCRCA has been reaching out to our First Nation neighbours by providing education programs, and consulting on programs such as the St. Clair River AOC and Drinking Water Source Protection. This engagement has proved to be productive but has pointed to the need to continue and expand. The SCRCA should develop an Engagement Plan to ensure the sharing of each other's expertise and knowledge to the benefit of the watersheds we share.



Develop Policies to Guide Acquisition of Conservation Lands: The SCRCA works with the St. Clair Region Conservation Foundation in accepting donations of lands that further meet the objectives of the Conservation Authority. An acquisition plan will assist in prioritizing opportunities and provide direction in seeking funding for significant watershed properties.



Update Property Management Plans: With changing expectations and trends in outdoor recreation, Authority, Foundation, and other Property Management Plans will be updated and will include issues such as accessibility, natural heritage protection balanced with outdoor recreation opportunities, and financial sustainability.

Goal 4 – Build a stronger and more valued organization through business excellence

The St. Clair Region Conservation Authority has been a leader in developing a comprehensive conservation program in a fiscally responsible manner. On an ongoing basis, Authority staff work to find funds to undertake the proposed projects and to take advantage of funding opportunities that arise. Efforts to find alternative sources of funds have helped the SCRCA maintain one of the lowest municipal levy levels amongst the 36 Conservation Authorities. The SCRCA has been able to be successful due to a supportive Board of Directors and dedicated staff. The following strategic actions are designed to build upon these strengths.

Strategic Actions

Corporate Excellence and Sustainability:

- Continue to operate in an efficient and financially sound manner, providing excellent client service and delivery of programs and services and strive to maintain our positive image in the community.
- Continue to explore opportunities to reduce duplication, streamline approval processes, and build business excellence.
- Develop and implement a sustainable funding model that aligns with our customer service objectives and our strategic plan. The sustainable funding model will incorporate self-generated revenue and service fees, maximized efficiencies and cost control measures, appropriate provincial transfer payments and municipal levies.
- Continue to be innovative and thorough in seeking funds from supporting organizations to support the strategic actions outlined in this document.
- Continue to seek funding opportunities that can support our municipalities in undertaking projects that improve our watersheds. Annually approved project-specific grant funds must also be separately identified in the funding model but included in overall revenue streams.
- Capital assets will be managed for long-term sustainability.

Implement Strategic Succession Planning Process: To ensure a continuity of services as staff retire or leave the organization, it is important that a plan is in place to replace or redistribute duties and responsibilities.

Promote a Culture of Continual Learning: To ensure that staff and board members are able to effectively carry out their responsibilities and can grow in their roles, educational opportunities need to be explored and utilized.

