



Natural Heritage System: Frequently Asked Questions

More information, including an interactive project story map, can be found at:
www.nation.on.ca/NHS

What is a Natural Heritage System?

A Natural Heritage System (NHS) is defined by the Province of Ontario as:
“A system made up of natural heritage features and areas, and linkages intended to provide connectivity (at the regional or site level) and support natural processes which are necessary to maintain biological and geological diversity, natural functions, viable populations of indigenous species and ecosystems. These systems can include natural heritage features and areas, federal and provincial parks and conservation reserves, other natural heritage features, lands that have been restored or have the potential to be restored to a natural state, areas that support hydrologic functions and working landscapes that enable ecological functions to continue. The Province has a recommended approach for identifying natural heritage systems, but municipal approaches that achieve or exceed the same objectives may also be used”
 (Provincial Policy Statement 2014).

The United Counties of Prescott and Russell and Stormont, Dundas, and Glengarry identify Natural Heritage Systems in their Official Plan schedules and protect the ecological integrity of these areas through environmental policies.

Why are Natural Heritage Systems important?

An NHS typically includes natural features such as woodlands, wetlands, watercourses, and agricultural lands that provide society with ecosystem services that are life sustaining or improve quality of life, including clean water, pollination, and flood damage reduction.

Natural Heritage Systems are also identified to help conserve biological diversity and maintain ecological functions, such as movement corridors for wildlife and endangered species habitat.

We recognize growth in road networks and urban development and want to ensure we have strong green infrastructure that can maintain a resilient landscape.

In short, Natural Heritage Systems maintain the health of landscape and communities; are the essential backbone of sustainability (economic, environmental, social, and cultural); and support the full life cycle of living creatures in their environment.





What are the components of a Natural Heritage System?

Natural heritage systems can include natural areas, areas with the potential to be restored, areas that support hydrologic functions, and working landscapes that enable ecological functions to continue (from Provincial Policy Statement 2014).

Draft maps have been re-tooled and redefined by municipal partners to identify key "core natural heritage areas" and the "linkages" that connect these areas.

Our Natural Heritage System includes:

- **Cores:** Environmentally significant components of the NHS that provide habitat for animals and are protected from development activities (e.g. provincially significant wetlands, significant woodlands, public forests, rivers, etc.).
- **Linkages:** Provide connectivity between cores (e.g. movement corridors for wildlife) to maintain biological and geological diversity.
- **Enhancements:** Improve existing NHS features by restoring critical ecological functions (e.g. reforesting an open field or planting tree buffers along watercourses to increase forest cover, reduce erosion, and create habitat for wildlife).

What are the goals of the Natural Heritage System?

- Identify key natural heritage features and supporting areas.
- Recognize local linkages and wildlife corridors between natural heritage features.
- Improve existing environmental policies to better protect environmentally significant areas and the linkages that connect them.
- Provide a scientific basis for land and water stewardship activities.
- Protect and enhance regional biodiversity, indigenous species, and ecosystems.
- Help to mitigate the effects of climate change such as flooding and drought.
- Conserve natural legacy for future generations.

Why should we care about Natural Heritage Systems Planning?

The NHS contributes to the health and wellbeing of residents by making important contributions to surface and ground water quality, forest cover, flood and erosion control, wildlife habitat, air quality, pollination, property values, and quality of life, health, and wellbeing.

The NHS also contributes to reducing risks associated with climate change and helps inform mitigation and adaptation strategies.



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How is the Natural Heritage System expected to be applied in practice?

Municipal, County and Conservation Authority staff will work together to review planning development applications to ensure they are consistent with Provincial, County and Municipal natural heritage policies, and that significant natural heritage areas are conserved. Enhancement areas will also be identified to help restore the local environment.

Who is taking part in the project?

The United Counties of Prescott and Russell, and Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry have partnered with South Nation Conservation (SNC) to complete a Natural Heritage System Project on their behalf.

SNC has a long history of working with municipal partners to collect ecological data, manage lands, engage the public on environmental issues and deliver environmental approvals on the ground. This experience puts SNC in an ideal position to work with local agencies and partners to identify environmental planning opportunities, gaps, challenges, and areas for clarification.

SNC will also be working with partners like the Raisin Region Conservation Authority, Mohawk Council of Akwesasne and Algonquins of Pikwakanagan to redefine the important linkages within the natural system that best reflects local natural heritage, while finding a balance between indigenous ecosystems, and the importance of agriculture and other land uses on the landscape.

When is the project expected to be completed?

SNC has been working with the Counties and partner municipalities to review existing environmental and land-use development policies and issues while preparing draft Natural Heritage System maps. Several workshops and meetings with municipal planners and stakeholders were held at project onset in late 2019 and early 2020 to gather information, data, and identify gaps and opportunities in the existing provincial and local policy framework.

Online public consultations are planned for the end of 2020 and SNC will work with municipal partners to refine draft mapping and policy updates for Spring 2021.



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Will I be able to review the draft maps and provide feedback?

Once draft maps and policies are prepared to the satisfaction of the partner Counties, SNC will host public consultation sessions and will be seeking input on the proposed mapping and policy framework. Please access the [project "story map"](#) and [project webpage](#) for additional details and to provide feedback. Details on public information sessions will be posted online and in local newspapers when available.

Please note that SNC's public information sessions do not replace the County's public meeting requirements to make Official Plan amendments. Once SNC has incorporated comments received through consultation and worked with municipalities to explore the updates, they will be provided to both Counties for consideration. To adopt the updated mapping schedules and policies, an update to their Official Plan will be required, where new public meetings will be held.

Which areas does the Project cover?

The Natural Heritage System will include the eight lower-tier municipalities in the United Counties of Prescott and Russell:

- Alfred and Plantagenet
- Casselman
- Champlain
- Clarence-Rockland
- East Hawkesbury
- Hawkesbury
- Nation
- Russell

And the six lower-tier municipalities in the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry:

- North Dundas
- North Glengarry
- North Stormont
- South Dundas
- South Glengarry
- South Stormont



Which areas of the Province have undertaken Natural Heritage Studies?

NHS Planning is included in all Official Plans within Ontario. Projects have been undertaken in Counties and Municipalities, in partnership with Conservation Authorities, throughout the Province, including:

- [City of Ottawa](#)
- [Leeds and Grenville](#)
- [Prince Edward County](#)
- [Wellington County](#)
- [City of Hamilton](#)
- [Niagara Region](#)

Will there be any new policies associated with this project?

Additional policy updates will be made to address gaps where certain environmental policies are not being implemented as intended. This includes environmental impact studies, coastal wetlands, sensitive groundwater areas, and Significant Valleylands.

Will municipalities use the Natural Heritage System in Official Plan documents?

The NHS will be added to Official Plan schedules and policies will be implemented to enhance, protect, and restore the critical habitat within the NHS. These policies promote habitat conservation, connectivity, and ultimately, biodiversity and climate change resiliency.

How will the Natural Heritage System affect my property?

Generally, property owners will still be able to cut down dead or dying trees from their properties or cut trees for firewood in accordance with existing municipal tree by-laws, where they exist.

Once the NHS comes into effect, the policies will apply to all new development applications in accordance with the Planning Act such as rezoning, severance or subdivision.

Policies may apply to development of a house or site alteration if the lands are within or adjacent to a Core or Linkage Natural Heritage Areas (e.g. significant wetland).

NHS policies will not apply outside of Core or Linkage Natural Heritage Areas.

This study will also offer policy updates to municipalities to streamline environmental reviews outside of these areas to make development activities proceed more effectively.



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How will the Natural Heritage System impact my farm?

Proposed core natural heritage areas are concentrated in areas with large tracts of significant forests and already protected wetlands, with most of these lands already in public ownership.

However, many of the proposed linkages may overlap with agricultural lands and will include some natural areas.

It is important to note that all farming activities (including agricultural uses, agriculturally related uses, and on-farm diversified uses) are permitted in the Natural Heritage System. In other words, there would be virtually no impact on farming activity, except for the construction of new non-farm buildings in significant areas within the system. These areas would already be subject to restrictive policies.

Please note that this does not mean that development cannot occur but may mean that permission may be required in some areas. The permission may include a request to consider building on a different part of your property or incorporating different construction mitigation activities in the design to ensure the ecological integrity of the system is maintained.

Agricultural practices and activities will not be impacted.

We are supportive of the role of agriculture in our environment and economy and have identified agricultural lands as important areas that are worth conserving within the NHS.

These working landscapes preserve valuable ecosystems such as grasslands; create diverse natural habitats; trap greenhouse gases within crops and soils; help to mitigate flood risks and provide access to resources and food.

Impact on Property Values and Taxes

There should be little impact to assessed properties that contain natural heritage features or get designated within the Natural Heritage System. Generally, property valuations already note whether a property contains a feature such as a woodlot or wetland and have assessed the property accordingly.

Natural Heritage Systems may increase property values by protecting important natural heritage features in the area, such as forests and wetlands and by promoting nearby public ownership of some of these key features for future conservation efforts.



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Tax Incentives and Programs

Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program (MFTIP) and Conservation Lands Tax Incentive Program (CLTIP) are provincial programs between certain landowners and the Province for land conservation and maintenance of certain natural heritage features.

Privately owned forests and wetlands are eligible through these programs for a 75% reduction on property taxes. To be eligible, property owners must complete an approved Forest Management Plan and agree to maintain the forest or wetland for 10 years.

SNC offers its [Woodlot Advisory Service](#) at no-cost to residents within the United Counties. The program provides site visits by trained forestry professionals, a preliminary site evaluation and map, and suggestions on woodlot management.

Property owners may also be eligible to receive up to a \$500 grant from SNC towards the creation of a Forest Management Plan to become eligible for tax incentives. Residents are encouraged to contact SNC for more information, or to seek advice for their properties.

SNC Forested Land Securement Program and History

Land securement, by public bodies, is an effective way to protect natural heritage for public benefit and conservation.

Since 1960, SNC has secured over 13,000 acres of land in Eastern Ontario through purchase and donations. SNC also manages over 10,000 acres of forest on behalf of the Counties of SDG and the United Counties of Prescott-Russell also own a significant amount of public land, including 18,000 acres within the Larose Forest, which is the second largest man-made forest in Southern Ontario.

Public landowners in the region also include: municipalities, the Province of Ontario, Ducks Unlimited, and the Nature Conservancy of Canada, among others.

Many of SNC's public properties were secured during the 1960s and 1970s, partially financed through the Province's former "Provincial Agreement Forest Program".

Lands acquired between 1960 and 1980 tended to contain significant non-forested area, which was subsequently planted. SNC land, along with County-owned land, contributed to the magnitude and success of regional afforestation through the 20th century.

In 2009, SNC resumed active land securement relying on natural heritage conservation programs such as the Ecological Gifts Program (Environment Canada), Natural Spaces Land Acquisition & Stewardship Program (Ontario Heritage Trust) and the Lafleche Wetland Trust. Gifts and donations have been an important source of new securements.



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As a member of the Ontario Land Trust Alliance, SNC is also [approved to accept donations of land](#) which can provide significant financial benefits to donors.

SNC's Land Securement Strategy will be updated in future to direct forest securement efforts within the Natural Heritage System.