



November 14, 2016

Ms. Terese McIntosh
Biodiversity and Wetlands Program Policy Advisor
Natural Resources Conservation Policy Branch
Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry
300 Water Street
Peterborough, Ontario K9J 8M5

(Sent via email to terese.mcintosh@ontario.ca)

Dear Ms. McIntosh

Re: A Wetland Conservation Strategy for Ontario 2016-2030

Ontario, Stone, Sand & Gravel Association (OSSGA) is pleased to provide comments regarding the discussion paper entitled "A Wetland Conservation Strategy for Ontario 2016-2030" posted on the EBR # 012-7675 on August 8th, 2016. These comments augment the response OSSGA submitted to the MNRF on October 30, 2015 on the discussion paper "Wetland Conservation in Ontario".

OSSGA strongly supports the development of a strategic plan for the conservation of wetlands in Ontario and we offer the following response to the MNRF's proposed 15-year blueprint, A Wetland Conservation Strategy for Ontario. The aggregate industry plays a valuable role in the protection and potential creation of Ontario's biodiversity.

Vision & Guiding Principles

OSSGA supports the MNRF's goal to strengthen the legislative framework for conserving wetlands and its commitment to continue to improve and develop policy approaches to prevent the net loss of wetlands. Efforts to sustain the important (ecological, economic, cultural, spiritual, and social) benefits of wetlands should be prioritized but efforts to enhance wetland functions should also be recognized through the conservation strategy. OSSGA supports the three hierarchical conservation priorities (protection, mitigation, restoration) with wetlands conserved based on a precautionary approach, provided the best available accurate, objective data is used to determine wetland protection. This includes a re-evaluation of the subjective classification of provincially significant wetlands under the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System (OWES).

Goals and Outcomes

Awareness

OSSGA recognizes the need for better education, communication and awareness about the importance of wetlands but believes that there is also a need to support, encourage and promote industry members as environmental stewards through wetland enhancement/creation projects.

Knowledge

OSSGA supports research to increase knowledge about Ontario's wetlands. We agree that there is a need to better understand wetland ecological patterns and processes, as well as the relationship between wetlands and uplands; therefore, we support ongoing research and improvements to monitoring. This includes determining a system to evaluate the wetland ecosystem services of created wetlands.

Establishing a framework for determining province-wide priority areas for conservation and restoration is also imperative but this framework must include areas of resource development necessary to support the growing needs of Ontario's population. Improving knowledge based monitoring techniques to reduce the current subjectivity in wetland evaluation is also required.

Partnerships

OSSGA supports a coordinated approach and believes that the MNRF should continue to develop conservation partnerships with industry, non-government organizations, stakeholders and interest groups to develop wetland conservation strategies that balance the need for wetland conservation with the requirement for resource development. With increased pressure for land conversion due to population growth and the need for new and improved infrastructure, there is potential for conflicting and competing land uses. As such, partnerships should be encouraged and utilized.

With over 6000 active pit and quarry licences in the province, the aggregate industry has the potential to contribute to the creation of new, biologically diverse wetland habitat, in support of the no net loss concept. As a result, there are growing opportunities for the aggregate industry to work collaboratively with partners to develop and implement initiatives for wetland habitat creation.

Policy

OSSGA supports the strengthening of Ontario's wetland policies through a review of current applicable laws, regulations and policies. **A single, comprehensive wetland policy (led by the MNRF) that guides and incorporates current wetland policies is required. A clear and consistent wetland definition is also required.**

We support the prevention of net loss of wetlands. OSSGA believes that the mitigation hierarchical approach (avoidance of impacts, minimization of unavoidable impacts, and compensation for impacts that cannot be avoided) is a reasonable approach to achieving no net loss for non-significant wetlands and recommends a net gain mitigation/compensation option for minor wetland areas that have been identified as provincially significant. We believe that this integrated resources management approach balances the need for wetland conservation with the competing needs of resource development, while ensuring that there is no net loss of wetland function in Ontario. Additionally, this approach provides additional opportunities for wetland stewardship with the potential for increased wetland ecosystem services.

OSSGA further recommends implementing a systematic, market based approach for assessing and mitigating (or compensating) impacts to wetlands. One example is developing a wetland banking scheme, similar to the Species at Risk Benefits Exchange concept (SARBEX) where creators of wetlands can sell credits for wetland enhancement projects that result in tangible improvements. Those who

impact wetlands can then purchase those credits to offset impacts of development and achieve the no net loss requirements.

Wetland Inventory and Mapping

OSSGA supports the updating and refining of provincial wetland mapping by standardizing wetland mapping techniques. More detailed mapping is required, as is less subjective assessments. This information will be necessary to focus wetland conservation efforts on significant wetlands and provide necessary data for an assessment of wetland offsetting.

Developing Policy Approaches

OSSGA supports the development of a wetland offsetting policy that is consistent with the *Aggregate Resources Act* (ARA) and additional relevant policies, including but not limited to the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) under the *Planning Act*.

Under the PPS, there is currently no provision for wetland offsetting of provincially significant wetlands (i.e. resource development cannot be traded for the protection of a wetland elsewhere). OSSGA recognizes that there are highly vulnerable wetlands with biodiversity elements that are irreplaceable and should be protected but proposes that the new wetland policy framework allow for access to minor provincially significant wetlands using the net gain mitigation/compensation approach.

With the need for new and improved infrastructure in Ontario, competing interests in land development present an opportunity to apply a landscape-scale approach to wetland offsetting. **On a broad scale, protecting every individual feature may be less beneficial than developing and implementing offset projects that allow for net ecological biodiversity benefits (through the provision of wildlife habitat).** OSSGA recognizes that a clear and consistent (among regulators and jurisdictions) framework (ideally administered through an independent governing body) for wetland offsetting is crucial. There have been several positive case studies of biodiversity offsetting but there is still a need to establish an effective method for establishing equivalency between the impacts and the offset.

OSSGA encourages the MNRF to ensure uniformity amongst all districts and divisions regarding changes to wetland policies to ensure consistency with the ARA. Permitting for wetland creation/removal on licensed aggregate sites will lead to major site plan amendments, and approval of site plan amendments is a lengthy application process resulting in production delays.

Evaluating the Significance of Wetlands

The Ontario Wetland Evaluation System (OWES) evaluates the relative importance of individual wetlands based on biological, social, hydrological and special features. These evaluations have serious implications on permitting of new aggregate operations often because of added values that classify certain wetlands (particularly tiny wetlands – as small as 0.01 ha in size) as significant.

Section 3.2 of the Southern OWES:

Such tiny wetlands may be recognized when, in the opinion of the evaluator, the small wetland pocket may provide important ecological benefit.

Additional guidance is needed to accurately and objectively assess the value of these tiny wetlands as they often possess quite limited ecological functions or are a result of human created habitat,

agricultural drainage ditches, or wetlands that have developed as the unintended result of an anthropogenic project. Additionally, in the OWES, no consideration is allowed for the replacement and/or enhancement of these wetlands, even though the recreation of wetland habitat has proven to be achievable. Although these small, unimportant wetlands have the potential to be compensated through the restoration and enhancement of more significant wetland areas (or the replacement with functionally equivalent habitat), the OWES fails to provide a process to support this. OSSGA recommends changing relevant wetland policies, including but not limited to the PPS, to allow access to these tiny wetlands as well as edges of provincially significant wetlands provided there is net gain compensation that replaces or enhances affected wetlands.

OSSGA communicated this issue to the ministry during the public review of the updated draft of the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System manual in 2012, and moving forward, would like to participate in the review and development of a new Ontario Wetland Evaluation System.

Targets

By 2025, Ontario's significant wetlands are identified and conserved to sustain essential ecosystem services.

By 2030, the net loss of wetlands is halted in areas where wetland loss has been greatest.

Targets should be both achievable and measurable. OSSGA questions how this information will be measured to determine the progress and success of these targets. Additionally, how will areas where wetland loss has been the greatest be determined geographically?

OSSGA recommends the no net loss concept as a target; however, an accurate method of measuring this target (i.e. ecological function, hydrological function, social components) will need to be determined.

Conclusion

OSSGA supports the development of a wetland conservation strategy that commits to the no net loss of wetlands. A wetland offsetting policy developed with an integrated resources management approach that balances the need for wetland conservation with the competing needs of resource development will promote sustainable use of Ontario's natural resources.

Thank you again for the consideration of our comments. Should you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at azelek@ossga.com or 905-507-0711.

Sincerely,
ONTARIO STONE, SAND AND GRAVEL ASSOCIATION



Ashlee Zelek
Manager, Environment & Education

cc. Pauline Desroches, Manager, Resources Development Section, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry