

Grand River Conservation Authority

Report number: GM-02-25-15

Date: Feb 28, 2025

To: Members of the Grand River Conservation Authority

Subject: Conservation Services Update

Recommendation:

THAT Report Number GM-02-25-15 – Conservation Services Update be received as information.

Summary:

The Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) delivers conservation services as a Category 2 (municipal service) program under Memoranda of Understanding between the GRCA and participating municipalities. These services include delivery of cost-share grant programs to support private land stewardship actions to improve watershed health. Funding for the cost-share grants comes from various sources, including participating and non-participating municipalities and federal and provincial grants.

In 2024 staff worked with municipal partners to renew grant agreements for the Rural Water Quality Programs for Dufferin County, Wellington County, the Region of Waterloo, County of Brant, and Haldimand County. Agreements were also renewed for continued delivery of the Hamilton Well Decommissioning Program, and Brant Grow Green Program.

Report:

To support the Grand River Conservation Authority's (GRCA) Strategic Plan priority of improving watershed health, the GRCA provides conservation services to landowners to help them protect water quality and enhance natural resources on their properties. These conservation services are delivered as a Category 2 (municipal service) program under Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) between the GRCA and participating municipalities. The Category 2 MOUs came into effect on January 1, 2024.

A key element of the GRCA's conservation services is delivery of outreach and financial and technical assistance to landowners to implement beneficial projects. Funding for cost-share grants provided to landowners comes from various sources, including participating and non-participating municipalities and federal and provincial grants.

The GRCA has administered and delivered a Rural Water Quality Program (RWQP) on behalf of Haldimand, Brant, Wellington, and Dufferin counties and the Region of Waterloo for many years. These municipalities provide grant funding to the GRCA for distribution to landowners as cost share grants to support approved water quality improvement projects. Combined municipal grant contributions of \$800,000 are anticipated in 2025 to offset landowner project costs. The county-wide programs are delivered by local conservation authorities outside the Grand River watershed.

The Haldimand, Brant, Wellington and Dufferin RWQP agreements expired at the end of 2023. In 2024 these agreements were renewed for a 5-year term, subject to annual budget approval. These are multi-party agreements between the municipality and all Conservation Authorities delivering cost share funding within the municipality on their behalf. The Region of Waterloo RWQP funding agreement expires at the end of 2025.

A 5-year agreement with the County of Brant for delivery of funding through the Brant Grow Green Program was renewed in 2024 as was an agreement with the City of Hamilton for continued delivery of a well decommission grant program on their behalf.

GRCA delivers a rural Clean Water Program on behalf of Oxford County, which is administered by the Upper Thames Region Conservation Authority (UTRCA). The UTRCA is taking the lead on drafting a multi-party agreement for continued program delivery in 2025.

GRCA seeks out additional funding to support private land stewardship projects across the watershed. This funding enhances municipal RWQPs where they exist and brings cost share funding where there is no municipal program. In 2024, GRCA was awarded \$493,000 over 4 years through the Canada Water Agency, Great Lakes Freshwater Ecosystem Initiative. The goal of the program is to help prevent toxic and nuisance algae in Lake Erie through targeted implementation of agricultural best practices. The project offers cost share funding to farmers implementing projects to address phosphorus losses in the Nith and Fairchild Creek watersheds, key source areas for non-point source phosphorus contributions to the Grand River.

In 2025 the GRCA continues to deliver cost-share funding to landowners provided by Forests Canada (formerly Forests Ontario), Tree Canada in partnership with Conservation Ontario, and the Fisheries and Oceans Canada Habitat Stewardship Program for Aquatic Species at Risk.

Depending on the program, eligible projects may include tree planting, stream fencing, erosion control structures, decommissioning private water wells, manure storage upgrades, nutrient management planning, cover crops and others.

Landowner projects implemented with support from Conservation Services delivered programs contribute to improving watershed health. Projects help to improve and protect water quality and provide additional environmental, economic and social benefits by building soil health, improving landscape resilience to extreme weather events, sequestering carbon, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting source water, providing recreational activities, and fostering biodiversity.

Since 1998 the RWQP has delivered over \$25 million of cost share to help landowners implement more than 8,000 voluntary projects to improve and protect water quality across the watershed. In addition to the funding provided by municipalities and partner agencies, landowners contributed \$45 million towards the projects for a total investment of over \$70 million.

Financial Implications:

Combined municipal contributions of \$800,000, and \$250,000 from partner programs delivered by GRCA are anticipated to offset landowner project costs in 2025.

Other Department Considerations:

Not Applicable.

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