

ACTION REQUEST – Planning Services	
To:	Warden and Members of Council
Date of Meeting:	November 15, 2021
Subject:	SDG Natural Heritage Study

RECOMMENDATIONS:

THAT the Council of the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry receives the Natural Heritage Study, 2021 Final Report and directs staff to:

1. Initiate an Official Plan Amendment to implement the Natural Heritage Study;
2. Include provisions for updated forest cover mapping and increased funding toward purchasing forested lands for consideration in the 2022 draft budget;
3. Work with the local municipalities and Conservation Authorities to ensure that all Provincially Significant Wetlands are recognized in zoning by-laws and covered through regulations;
4. Request that the six local municipalities and province of Ontario consider transferring surplus properties that may have an environmental function to the County forestry division or local Conservation Authorities; and
5. Work with the local municipalities and conservation authorities to prepare a comprehensive package of incentive and donation options for landowners interested in stewardship.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report recommends that Council receive the Natural Heritage Study, 2021 and direct staff to undertake initiatives to implement the study.

BACKGROUND:

What is a Natural Heritage System?

Municipalities are required to identify and protect natural heritage systems as part of their responsibilities under the *Provincial Policy Statement, 2020*. A Natural Heritage System (NHS) is a system of interconnected natural features such as forests, rivers, wetlands, and agricultural lands. These systems are made up of core natural areas and natural linkages that can connect these features and habitats. They support wildlife movement to maintain biological diversity, natural functions, and ecosystems.



South Nation Conservation (with support from Raisin Region Conservation Authority) was contracted by the United Counties of Prescott and Russell and SDG Counties to prepare a study to identify the natural heritage system in the two regions, along potential linkages that could be enhanced to connect these features and provide improved habitat and movement corridors for wildlife. A copy of the study and mapping of cores and linkages is attached to this report.

Regional Cores and Linkages

The study includes the identification of 15 regional cores in both Counties. These regional cores have some of the best natural habitat in Eastern Ontario and generally include provincially significant wetlands, large public land holdings, and areas identified by the province for their natural or scientific qualities. These includes areas such as the Summertown Forest, Loch Garry, Newington Bog, Warwick Forest, and Winchester Bog. Approximately 26% of the overall land in regional cores is in public ownership, but this also can vary widely from 0% to 80% depending on the area. Corridors connecting these regions consist of lands in agricultural production, woodlands, wetlands, and rivers. Natural cover in these corridors varies from 8% to 60%.

Several other features were studied as part of the project including coastal wetlands along the St. Lawrence River and significant woodland mapping criteria. [Forest cover mapping](#) in SDG was last reviewed based on 2014 aerial photography and having updated information will be important for future local and County councils as they make decisions on land use and environmental initiatives. Between 2008 and 2014 there was a 4.3% decrease in forest cover in SDG, and forest cover by local municipality ranges from 13.3% to 41.1%, with an overall forest cover of 29% of land across SDG. As part of the recommendations to Council, staff intend to include updated forest cover mapping in the 2022 budget using the latest aerial photos and Lidar mapping.

Land ownership

The Natural Heritage Study report notes that public ownership is the most straightforward and effective approach to preserving natural features and buffer areas. Staff recommend that Council consider increased funding toward purchasing forested lands in the 2022 budget that could be placed in a forestry reserve to purchase properties with environmental features when available, especially in the regional cores and linkages.

Additionally, staff recommend that the County request that the six local municipalities consider transferring surplus properties that may have an environmental function to the County forestry division or their local Conservation Authorities. It was noted in the preparation of the Natural Heritage System that while local municipalities may own lands within the regional cores, these were not



necessarily shown on the maps as they generally do not have a formal management plan or any protected status and could be declared surplus by future Councils.

Transferring properties with natural features to organizations with long-term stewardship mandates could have significant positive impacts, especially properties that are landlocked or have little potential tax revenue. South Stormont has recently transferred several properties to the SDG forestry division and is partnering with Raisin Region Conservation Authority to create a new conservation area in Long Sault. Staff recommend facilitating more of these types of transfers with the potential for covering costs and waiving fees to recognize the overall positive benefit to County residents.

Significant provincial land holdings such as near Hoople Bay, Summerstown Forest, and Winchester Bog have detailed use agreements and management plans but others may be at a risk of being declared surplus. While municipalities generally are circulated these properties, a comprehensive land transfer to the County forestry division could offer greater protection for features not currently identified for long term management by the province.

Implementation

The updated mapping and recommendations should be implemented in the County Official Plan, as part of the County's obligations under the Provincial Policy Statement. Policy updates will address known gaps, including environmental impact studies, coastal wetlands, and watercourse setbacks.

Policies will be implemented to enhance, protect, and restore the critical habitat within the NHS. These policies will also streamline environmental reviews to make small-scale development easier for private landowners. A summary of the recommended policies is included in the attached report.

Provincially significant wetlands form a key anchor of the natural heritage system and are required to be identified and protected through the Provincial Policy Statement. However, several of these wetlands are not recognized in municipal zoning by-laws and the Raisin Region Conservation Authority's [Enforceable Area](#) does not include non-coastal provincially significant wetlands. It is recommended that County staff work to support the local municipalities and Conservation Authorities and ensure that all Provincially Significant Wetlands are recognized in zoning by-laws and covered through regulations.

Agricultural uses are also a key part of the natural heritage system, and protecting and preserving this system will not succeed without increased partnerships with farmers. It is recommended that staff work with the local municipalities and conservation authorities to prepare a comprehensive package of incentive and



donation options for landowners interested in stewardship. These may specifically target landowners in the regional cores and linkage areas where the most benefit could be achieved.

OPTIONS AND DISCUSSION:

1. Recommended:

THAT the Council of the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry receives the Natural Heritage Study, 2021 Final Report and directs staff to:

- a) Initiate an Official Plan Amendment to implement the Natural Heritage Study;
- b) Include provisions for updated forest cover mapping and increased funding toward purchasing forested lands for consideration in the 2022 draft budget;
- c) Work the local municipalities and Conservation Authorities to ensure that all Provincially Significant Wetlands are recognized in zoning by-laws and covered through regulations;
- d) Request that the six local municipalities and Province of Ontario consider transferring surplus properties that may have an environmental function to the County forestry division or their local Conservation Authorities; and
- e) Work with the local municipalities and conservation authorities to prepare a comprehensive package of incentive and donation options for landowners interested in stewardship.

These recommendations will help SDG meet its obligations under the Provincial Policy Statement and enhance the natural environment in the Counties.

- 2. Not recommended:** That Council receive this report and take no further action. The PPS requires that Council not only identify a natural heritage system but also protect it for the long-term. At a minimum, the study should be implemented through an Official Plan amendment.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS:

The recommendations in this report generally are addressed through annual budgets such as advertising costs. Impacts of Recommendation 2 will be considered through the 2022 budget process. Although donations of private land to a government agency can impact the overall assessment base, many of these lands would already have eligibility for significant exemptions or reductions through provincial property tax reduction programs offered for farmers and woodlot owners. Retaining existing natural features is significantly less expensive than trying to establish new wetlands and woodlands.



LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT:

The recommendations would have a positive impact by ensuring additional environmental lands are protected for the long-term. Additionally, the policy updates will ensure there is greater clarity when considering development applications, with potential reductions in study requirements for low impact developments.

RELEVANCE TO STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

The proposal would support **Strategic Priority 1 – Service Delivery – A Smarter Approach** by providing high quality land use planning services to SDG local municipalities with consistent policies and initiatives to support the protection of natural heritage features throughout the Counties. The project was also coordinated as a partnership with the United Counties of Prescott and Russell and local conservation authorities. The recommendations also support **Strategic Priority 4 - Community Sustainability – A Place Where You Want to Be**, by ensuring the rural landscape and character of SDG is preserved.

OTHERS CONSULTED:

Local municipalities, local Conservation Authorities, Director of Transportation Services, Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENTS:

Natural Heritage Study, 2021 Final Report and mapping

RECOMMENDED BY:

APPROVED BY:

Peter Young
Director of Planning Services

T.J. Simpson, CAO