

FONOM Conference – May 12, 2005
Speech by Peter Krause, Chair, Conservation Ontario
Source Water Protection Planning

(Slide 1)

Thank you for your invitation to appear today to speak to you about a very important matter.

As we approach the fifth anniversary of the Walkerton water tragedy, source water protection has become an important issue in Ontario.

It is a complex subject, with the potential to significantly change the way we think about water and the way we address water issues.

My presentation will hopefully simplify many of these concerns as well as speak to the importance of all stakeholders working together to reach a common goal. It will look at how we protect water in order to ensure there is enough safe, clean water for all our needs.

(Slide 2)

I am speaking on behalf of Conservation Ontario today. This organization represents Ontario's 36 Conservation Authorities. This map gives you an idea of the area that CAs cover throughout the province.

As a bit of background, here's some information about Conservation Authorities. CAs are community-based natural resource management agencies that work in close partnership with you, the municipalities.

Almost 90 per cent of Ontario's population lives within a watershed that is managed by a Conservation Authority. That's almost 11 million people.

Conservation Authorities are organized on a watershed basis and often work across more than one municipal boundary.

Each Conservation Authority has a Board of Directors made up of municipally-appointed officials, many of whom are elected. In fact, about 70 per cent of CA board members are elected local.

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Ever since Walkerton, the people of Ontario have looked to us – and by that I mean all of us in this room – to provide them with the answers to a pretty important question: What will we do to ensure that Ontario's water supply is safe, secure and reliable?

Source water protection is a key component of the answer. It is cheaper and safer to stop water from getting polluted in the first place than to pay to have it cleaned up later.

And that is the simple explanation of what source water protection is – the protection of our surface and groundwater sources from contamination and overuse. By managing the influences on our lakes, rivers, streams and aquifers, we are able to ensure safer water in sustainable quantities – for today and for the future.

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This illustration provides you with an overview of how we protect water today in Ontario – and that includes both municipalities and conservation authorities.

We use a combination of approaches to ensure we have safe water, and these include:

- Source water protection
- Up to date water treatment systems
- Reliable pipes and water towers that make up our distribution system

- Professional training for water managers, and
- Careful testing of our water supplies

Source water protection is the first step among all these approaches. It is making sure that the water we take into our water systems is as clean and plentiful as it can be.

The Walkerton Tragedy and boil water advisories that we face regularly, show us that source water protection is important. Even with all of today's technology, we cannot absolutely guarantee that these systems will work effectively

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Source water protection begins with planning. When he was Commissioner of the Walkerton Inquiry, Justice Dennis O'Connor, stated that every watershed in Ontario needs a plan on how to protect its sources of water. Last year, Premier McGuinty's government announced the steps it would take to implement Justice O'Connor's recommendations on source water protection.

The provincial government is ultimately responsible for the important job of protecting the health of Ontarians, so it put a high priority on developing an approach to source water protection. Using expertise from both the private and public sectors, two reports were developed and released last year that provide a blueprint to protect Ontario's lakes, rivers, streams and aquifers.

The first report recommended steps to be taken by government and institutions to implement source water protection planning. The second report, prepared by a technical experts committee, will guide scientific research and analysis that will be the foundation of source water protection planning.

As well, the provincial government circulated the draft Safe Drinking Water legislation. It is expected that this legislation – which will provide us with the

specific details about how to carry out source water protection planning – will be presented in 2005.

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There are two simple concepts we need to understand when deciding how best to protect our sources of water.

One is that water flows where it likes – and that is often across the municipal boundaries.

The second is that as water flows it is influenced by both natural and human activities in its watershed.

Consequently, the best way to protect water is to manage as many of the bad influences on it that we can within the watershed area. That presents some challenges for municipalities and conservation authorities, particularly as water travels across private lands.

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Ontario's 36 Conservation Authorities have almost 60 years of experience in studying water issues and implementing natural resource management programs. To put it plainly, water is what we do.

That level of expertise and knowledge will be vital in developing source water protection plans that are solidly based on hard facts and the best science.

Conservation Authorities routinely work with landowners, environmental organizations, community groups, government agencies and, especially, municipalities to develop programs and projects that benefit watershed residents.

If water is what we do, then partnerships are the way we do it.

We are the consultants and the facilitators, not the decision-makers.

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When it comes to source water protection planning, the decision-makers will be the members of the proposed multi-sector, community-based organizations to be called the Source Water Protection Planning Committees.

The provincial government is still developing the legislation and regulations to set up the structure of the committees, but it is safe to say that they will be broadly representative with members from a variety of sectors, including significant representation from municipalities.

It's wise – and fair – to have a broad cross-section of the community involved in developing the plan. After all, it will be the people living in the watershed who ultimately need to own the plan and they will expect you and others to implement the plan.

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This chart illustrates the steps that are required to put the plans together.

It begins with assembling all the data we need such as watershed information, water budgets, technical data on water quality and water use. It also looks at watershed features or activities that may impact on water sources as well as identifies current or potential threats to water quality or supply, high risk land uses and vulnerable areas.

From here the committees would develop a plan of action which would then be presented to municipalities and watershed stakeholders for feedback and input.

The final step is approval by the Minister of the Environment.

It can take up to five years to develop a source water protection plan, but we are working on having the 'first generation plans' in place within three years. This assumes there is continued financial support for this exercise from the province.

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Science is the foundation of source water protection planning. So, at the base of the whole process are the technical experts from conservation authorities and government. Conservation Authorities staff will work with local experts such as municipal water managers, planners and others who bring special knowledge and expertise to the process.

Next it is proposed that there will be the source water protection planning committee. It would be the committee's job, in concert with the Conservation Authority board to engage the public in the planning process, to weigh the scientific data, to assess threats to our water and to identify the best methods for reducing the risks.

It will also be the committee's job to win support for the plan from watershed municipalities, community groups and residents. If the work has been done right – if everyone has been engaged from beginning to end – theoretically, it should be a fairly straightforward exercise.

However, I am a realist and I know it won't be easy. I do believe, however, with common sense and good judgment, we can all reach our goal together.

Once feedback is received, it is expected that the plan will be submitted to the Source Water Protection Planning Board, which is identical to the local Conservation Authority Board, wherever there is a conservation authority. The board would then submit the plan to the province for final approval.

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When it comes to collecting data and scientific information for source water protection planning, we are not starting from scratch.

Many municipalities and conservation authorities have already done a lot of the research needed for source water protection planning.

They are doing groundwater studies, identifying areas susceptible to contamination and marking out wellhead protection areas.

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All of this work is designed to answer one question: What has to be done to make sure that the water is clean as it enters the ground or the river?

To answer that question, the committee will have to look at land uses and activities across the watershed and measure their impact on source water.

Should some areas be set aside from development?

What do we do with source waters areas already designated for development?

What do we do with areas that are already developed?

There will be questions about the location, size and boundaries of source water areas. There will be questions about what types of incentives and regulations will ensure that best practices are encouraged and enforced in source water protection areas.

These are some of the issues and questions that the Source Water Protection Planning Committees will have to weigh as they write their plans.

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In the end, a source water protection plan that is science-based and broadly supported, will become an invaluable tool for every municipality as it goes about the important job of protecting the health of its residents and promoting growth in an economically sustainable, environmentally responsible way.

It is critical that the plans be comprehensive, transparent, cost effective and fair, because of the important role source protection plans will play in the future development of our urban and rural areas.

When it comes to implementing the plan, the world after source water protection will look a lot like the world before.

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Municipalities will still oversee their own land use plans and growth strategies. They will still build and operate water and sewage plants.

Conservation authorities will still provide technical and planning advice to their municipal partners. They will still protect sensitive environmental areas, such as wetlands, and will continue to promote conservation in the cities and best management practices on the farm and in rural areas.

The province will still issue Permits to Take Water and Certificates of Approval. It will still conduct research and set water quality standards.

The difference, however, is that all of this activity by municipalities, conservation authorities, the province and others will take place against the new backdrop of the source water protection plans.

Decisions will be made with more knowledge of how water quality and water supplies will be affected in their own watersheds as well as their neighbour's. We will have a better handle on how urban growth, agricultural intensification and industrial development affect the quality and quantity of our drinking water supplies.

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Of course, no discussion of an initiative of this size would be complete without talking about money.

Last November, the province confirmed its commitment to cover the cost of the planning process. That means the province will pay the cost of the scientific studies and research as well as the costs of the committees and public consultation.

Environment Minister Leona Dombrowsky and the Minister of Natural Resources David Ramsay announced in November, last year, that \$12.5 million would be given to conservation authorities and municipalities to get the research and other work started.

This is seen as initial funding.

It is not as clear who will pay for implementation costs – and that is what we are all wrestling with today. I expect the answer will become clearer after the province introduces its Safe Drinking Water Legislation and regulations.

The consensus is that the funding must be sufficient, secure and sustainable. It must cover the long-term capital and operating expenses of protecting our drinking water for current and future generations of Ontario residents.

All of this won't come cheaply. However, once we know what has to be done, we can set priorities and define a time frame for implementation that is achievable.

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For all of this to be successful, a number of factors should be in place.

We need a clear framework provided by new legislation and regulations.

Stakeholders from a variety of different sectors within local watersheds need to be involved in understanding what source water protection is and why it is important. They need to have clear and adequate information so they can make the decisions about the best approach to take to protect their lakes, rivers, streams and groundwater sources.

Strong technical data needs to be available to the committees as they start to build their action plans.

And, the political support of all levels of government, particularly at your level – the municipalities – is critical to the success of the entire process.

These source water protection plans will be living documents that are reviewed and updated as needed throughout the coming years in order to reflect current knowledge and science as well as the development pressures on the landscape.

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That brings me full circle back to you.

Conservation Authorities are ready to get on with the job of working with municipalities and others to ensure that our watersheds are safe, healthy and sustainable.

I know that many of you may come from areas not serviced by Conservation Authorities. In that regard, we are ready, willing and able to share our experience and expertise with you to help get the job done.

I'd like to leave you with a quote from Horace Annesley-Vachell:

"In nature, there are no rewards or punishments; there are consequences."

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share our perspectives with you today.