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## Briefing Note:

### Increasing natural cover and protections in the Lake Simcoe Watershed

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**About us:** The Rescue Lake Simcoe Coalition is a lake-wide member-based organization, representing 26 groups in the Lake Simcoe watershed, that provides leadership and inspires people to take action to protect Lake Simcoe. [www.rescuelakesimcoe.org](http://www.rescuelakesimcoe.org)

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Protecting natural heritage (forests, wetlands etc.) has multiple benefits; it reduces water quality impairments, increases ecosystem resilience, protects habitats of species at risk, and limits development and its impacts. In the Lake Simcoe watershed, a quality ecosystem supports the \$420 million / year sustainable recreation sector, and delivers millions in ecosystem services like clean water, flood control, climate regulation and water filtration.

Efforts are needed to achieve the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan's (LSPP) natural cover and shoreline targets. This briefing note suggests how to achieve some of the LSPP's natural cover targets.

### Context: Lake Simcoe Protection Plan and Statutory Review

The *Lake Simcoe Protection Act* was passed in 2008 following a campaign led by the Rescue Lake Simcoe Coalition, Environmental Defence, and Ontario Nature, with the support of the Ladies of the Lake, and upwards of 35 local groups. The passage of the Act, which received unanimous, all-party support in the Ontario Legislature, required the preparation of the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan (LSPP) which was enacted in 2009. Together with the Act, they represent the best watershed-based legislative/policy framework in Canada. They are used as a model by conservationists and policy-makers seeking stronger environmental policies to reduce phosphorus loading to water bodies and to protect water and watersheds. The *Lake Simcoe Protection Act* requires that a review of the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan be conducted by the Minister of the Environment at least every ten years to determine if the Plan needs to be amended.

## Status of Natural Heritage Protection in the Lake Simcoe watershed

The LSPP includes a target of 40% high quality natural cover (HQNC) in the Lake Simcoe watershed but no policies specifically support this target. Today, 28% of the watershed qualifies as HQNC but only half of that area is well protected by strong natural heritage policies that do not permit land use changes.

The advice herein supports both policy changes and policy implementation actions to move towards achieving this important ecological target.

## Coordinated Implementation Recommendations

1. Due to the significance of patch size, it is of utmost importance to protect and maintain the 25 hectare plus patches mapped by the province as **“High Quality Natural Cover”** using the following steps:

- A. Identify and ground truth the quality of the natural features:
  - i. The Province should continue to fund scientific research that examines the structure and composition of the High Quality Natural Cover parcels, and the presence of rare or endangered species, and their habitats, by the end of 2020.
  - ii. The Ministry of Natural Resources and the LSRCA along with municipalities need to map all known forest patches, then categorize by the 4 hectare (south) and 10 hectare (north) thresholds of the province’s *“Technical Definitions and Criteria for Identifying Key Natural Heritage Features and Key Hydrologic Features for the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan”*. Any woodlands below these thresholds should then be recommended for evaluation to see if they meet the density/crown cover metrics of the technical guide.
  - iii. All levels of government should cooperate on mapping and evaluation of any unevaluated natural cover, including wetlands.
- B. Municipalities and Upper tier Region or County put the natural features in Official Plans (maps, policies, definitions, and supportive lower-tier zoning).
- C. The Province must review Official Plans to confirm whether the natural features mapped by the Province, and shoreline areas, are in fact protected by Official Plans;
- D. Support non-policy initiatives and land trusts that protect features within the 25 hectare patches that do not meet the criteria for strong policy protection.

2. The Province must move past lip service to First Nations by providing meaningful opportunities for **First Nations’ to identify priority lands for protection** through a Traditional Ecological Knowledge assessment of the Lake Simcoe watershed.

3. The Province needs to work with municipalities to ensure they map the **Growth Plan Natural Heritage System** and incorporate the associated policies into their official plans within the identified time-frame. Once implemented, they will offer the best protection yet for natural heritage features and in particular for the linkage features between the features.

### **For Simcoe County, and the Regions of Durham, Kawartha Lakes, and York and their lower tier municipalities in the Lake Simcoe Watershed:**

4. We encourage all of the municipalities in the Lake Simcoe watershed to **adopt the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority's Natural Heritage System and Strategy**. If their NHS's recommended remediation and tree planting work were completed, then up to 60% of the Lake Simcoe watershed would be in some form of natural cover.

5. Municipalities should be encouraged to enact an **interim control bylaw** to protect the mapped High Quality Natural Cover parcels of 25 hectare plus from rezoning or land use changes until the research is complete.

### **For the Province:**

The following amendments to the Lake Simcoe Protection Plan would enable the achievement of natural heritage targets:

6. Amend the LSPP to require the establishment of natural cover targets in each subwatershed by 2020.

7. Subwatershed targets should be set for forest cover, wetland cover, and high quality natural cover. Some of these features will overlap.

8. Subwatershed natural cover targets should be based on the LSRCA's Natural Heritage System and Restoration Strategy which, if realized would result in 60% natural cover across the watershed;

9. LSPP guidance should be augmented by requiring LSPP decision-makers to have regard to the ecological diversity and function that undeveloped land will provide in the future.