

Far north at risk unless Ontario adopts new, inclusive planning process

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With the Ontario government poised to spend \$1 billion to promote development in the Ring of Fire, a new paper from Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Canada and Ecojustice identifies risks inherent in the current planning legislation and provides a solution.

Ontario's Far North is the world's largest ecologically intact area of boreal forest. It contains North America's largest wetlands, is home to a number of at-risk species, including caribou and lake sturgeon, and is a one of the world's critical storehouses of carbon. First Nations depend on these systems for food and medicines, sustenance of culture and spiritual values, their livelihoods, and rights. At the same time, the remote region contains potential world-class deposits of minerals that offer economic opportunities.

"Getting it Right in Ontario's Far North: The Need for Strategic Environmental Assessment in the Ring of Fire (Wawangajing)" points out that the current planning approaches in the Far North are piecemeal and narrowly focused on specific projects, or pieces of projects. Because of this, cumulative ecological and social effects, planning for regional infrastructure (roads, transmission lines, and railroads), and regional coordination, are not properly considered.

In identifying risks associated with the current planning approach, the authors noted that:

- There is no overall plan for this region beyond building a road;

- Current planning and approval processes are piecemeal and do not address cumulative effects anticipated with mines and all-weather infrastructure traversing biologically intact and globally significant regions; and,
- First Nations also must be decision-makers in the process or any development will be mired in delays and conflict.

The groups suggest that the path forward on Ring of Fire development must include a Regional Strategic Environmental Assessment (R-SEA). An R-SEA implemented in Ontario's Far North, say the authors, would reduce risks to the environment, people, and the economy. In addition, this approach has been recommended by the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario and the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, and builds on recommendations by the Far North Science Advisory Panel.

"Adopting an R-SEA planning process is a way of building consensus around where, when, and in what form development is appropriate as opposed to our current processes that ask communities - social and ecological - to bear the long-term impacts of new development," said Cheryl Chetkiewicz, Associate Conservation Scientist with WCS Canada.

In their report, the authors make the following recommendations to the Ontario Government:

- Look at the big picture regarding industrial development first: Establish a mandatory R-SEA process in Ontario's Far North. At a minimum, a R-SEA process should be required for the Ring of Fire before project-based environmental assessments and approvals can proceed.
- Gather the information needed to make smart decisions and to monitor ecosystem health: Implement a regional monitoring

program for watershed health. This program should be used to develop a reliable dataset that project proponents can use for cumulative effects assessments and to identify and measure thresholds of ecological change or disturbance that are not to be exceeded.

- Transform regional planning to address sustainability: Re-focus the Far North Land Use Strategy into a truly integrated, comprehensive regional planning approach that helps First Nations, multiple government ministries, and stakeholders to arrive at a shared future vision for the region.
- Address sustainability in community planning: Establish community-based land-use planning with First Nations that includes a sustainability-centred agenda as a follow-on to broader R-SEA planning.
- Bring environmental planning processes together under one roof: Employ a consolidated hearing approach to bring together environmental planning under the Far North Act, 2010, Environmental Assessment Act, Clean Water Act, and Mining Act.

Ecojustice staff lawyer Anastasia Lintner says the existing legal framework is broken and it's time for a change. "The Ontario government promised that it would no longer follow the status quo," she said. "Embracing this process will create a more sustainable future where development doesn't come at the expense of contaminated water and land."

"We have a chance to get things right when it comes to development in this intact, and culturally and ecologically important region," says Chetkiewicz. "We need a planning process that is equal to the scale and complexity of the challenge, rather than continuing to depend on piecemeal efforts that put wildlife species and human communities at higher risk in the face of global pressures like climate change and a race

for resources."

More information: To see a copy of *Getting it Right in Ontario's Far North: The Need for Strategic Environmental Assessment in the Ring of Fire (Wawangajing)*, go to: [wscanada.org/Portals/96/Docum ...
Ecojustice_FINAL.pdf](https://wscanada.org/Portals/96/Documents/Ecojustice_FINAL.pdf)

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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