BACKGROUNDER

Protect Ontario's Northern and Rural Communities Act, 2026

PROTECT ONTARIO

Ministry of Northern Economic Development and Growth

November 23, 2026

Ontario

Overview

Ontario is strengthening the long-term competitiveness, connectivity and resilience of northern and rural communities through strategic initiatives and transparent, evidence-based policy development. Strong transportation measures, modern infrastructure and competitive resource sectors are essential to ensuring these communities remain vibrant places to live, work and invest.

The introduction of the *Protect Ontario's Northern and Rural Communities Act, 2026*, and additional non-legislative items being proposed respond to initiatives identified through stakeholder engagement. These new action items in the Act, if passed, would help build stronger communities and support economic prosperity.

Enhancing Mobility, Access and Road Safety

Ontario is **improving access to transportation networks across the province, including Northern Ontario**, supporting safer, more reliable movement of people and goods by modernizing legislative and compliance frameworks. Key actions the province is taking include updating the Northern Ontario Transportation Plan and proposing to modernize Ontario Northland's legislative framework.

The province is also **strengthening connections to tourism destinations and experiences** through a **new trails strategy**, helping elevate Northern and rural Ontario as a premier, all-season tourist destination.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth

Ontario is responding to changing global and local pressures that are impacting northern and rural communities whose economies rely on local jobs and sustainable resources. The province is supporting Northern and rural Ontario through actions that **foster economic development**, while **safeguarding local communities and environments**.

Additionally, as part of its efforts to reduce red tape, Ontario is proposing to streamline natural resource permits and approvals, creating a more **predictable and efficient regulatory environment** that attracts investment and supports growth.

Ontario

Enhancing Mobility, Access and Road Safety Overview

Northern Ontario is a critical driver of the province's economic growth and competitiveness, supporting regional and interprovincial connectivity. This is why the province has made historic investments in Northern Ontario's transportation network, to support northern industries, unlock access to critical minerals and create good-paying jobs. This year alone, the province is investing more than $600 million to build, repair and expand highways, roads and bridges across Northern Ontario, improving traffic flow and road safety while creating good-paying jobs for construction workers and opening up parts of the province that had never been accessible by road.

By expanding the region's rest area network, investing in new and improved truck inspection stations, adding passing lanes and ramping up enforcement efforts, Ontario is keeping northern highways safe and supporting long-term growth.

Highlights include:

- Widening Highway 11/17 from Thunder Bay to Nipigon and from Kenora to the Manitoba border to protect a critical national corridor
- Expanding Highway 69 from Parry Sound to Sudbury
- Accelerating construction of more than 500 kilometres of all-season road to unlock access to the Ring of Fire five years ahead of schedule
- Conducting more than 17,400 commercial vehicle inspections and laying nearly 9,000 charges for regulatory and safety violations
- Starting work to replace the Hearst truck inspection station on Highway 11 and adding 14 kilometres of new passing lanes
- Restoring passenger rail service to Northeastern Ontario by bringing back the Northlander, a 740-kilometre rail line connecting Toronto to Timmins, offering riders access to 16 stops and a rail extension to Cochrane

Ontario

Enhancing Mobility, Access and Road Safety

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Renewing Ontario Northland's Legislative Framework	Ontario Northland provides important transportation connections for northern communities, helping residents access jobs, health care, essential services and economic opportunities. However, the legislation governing the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission has remained largely unchanged since 1902 and no longer reflects how the organization operates today. As Ontario Northland prepares to restore Northlander passenger rail service, modern governance and oversight structures are increasingly important to support its expanding operations. Outdated governance requirements and limited authority can create operational challenges.	Ontario is proposing to modernize Ontario Northland's legislation to strengthen accountability, improve safety and provide greater flexibility to deliver reliable transportation services across Northern Ontario. The proposed changes would update governance and oversight requirements, strengthen Ontario Northland's ability to address safety and security concerns, and better position the organization to respond to the evolving needs of northern communities. Modernizing this framework would also support future transportation improvements, including the return of the Northlander passenger rail service, helping reconnect northern communities and improve access to jobs, health care and essential services.

Ontario

Enhancing Mobility, Access and Road Safety

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Updating Northern Ontario Transportation Plan	As Ontario continues to improve Northern Ontario's highways, rail, ports and aviation infrastructure, there is a need to update the province's long-term transportation plan to reflect the region's evolving needs and economic opportunities. Since the original Northern Ontario Transportation Plan was released, the province has made progress on key infrastructure projects, while growing demand for critical minerals, expanding trade opportunities and the need for stronger connections between northern communities have reinforced the importance of a coordinated, long-term approach to transportation planning.	Ontario will release an updated Northern Ontario Transportation Plan, highlighting progress to date and establishing a path forward to strengthen the region's transportation network through 2051. The update will set the stage for further engagement with northern communities, Indigenous partners and stakeholders in the coming year to identify future priorities for improving highways, rail, ports and aviation. This work will help ensure Northern Ontario has the infrastructure needed to unlock its economic potential, improve access to essential services and keep people and goods moving safely and efficiently for generations to come. The updated plan will be finalized by fall 2027, following engagement with Indigenous communities, northern municipalities and stakeholders, starting early next year.

Ontario

Enhancing Mobility, Access and Road Safety

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Keeping Vehicle Inspections Reliable and Accessible Across Ontario	Ontario's DriveON program helps keep roads safe by ensuring vehicles meet provincial safety and emissions standards. Under the current system, the province has limited tools to address misconduct by individual vehicle inspection technicians. Enforcement measures can result in the suspension of an entire inspection centre, potentially disrupting services for drivers and businesses, particularly in northern and rural communities. Existing legislation also limits who can make accreditation and registration decisions, creating unnecessary administrative delays.	Ontario is proposing changes to strengthen oversight of vehicle inspections, improve road safety and keep essential inspection services accessible across the province. The proposed changes would allow the province to take faster, more targeted enforcement action against individual technicians who break the rules, without unnecessarily disrupting operations at an entire inspection centre. The changes would also streamline decision-making and strengthen accountability, helping ensure drivers and businesses can continue accessing reliable vehicle inspection services, particularly in northern and rural communities where alternative service locations may be limited.

Ontario

Enhancing Mobility, Access and Road Safety

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Streamlining G-Class Driver Testing	Ontario's driver testing approach is outdated. It focuses on basic car handling, rather than the skills novice drivers need to reduce the risk of collisions and does not make full use of modern technology. Today, those applying for a G1 licence must complete the knowledge test on traffic signs and rules of the road in-person. The lack of online options makes it inconvenient for people in Northern Ontario and across the province. Ontario is also the only jurisdiction in Canada and globally that requires two mandatory road tests.	The province is taking steps to expand access to online services, which would include allowing individuals seeking a G1 licence to complete the driver knowledge test online. Expanding access to online services would give people more choice and save Ontarians time and money, especially in northern and rural communities. The province is also considering options for when and how to move to a single road test model to align Ontario with the rest of Canada and global standards. Streamlined G-Class driver testing will evaluate drivers more effectively while ensuring they are adequately prepared for the responsibilities of getting behind the wheel. The current three-staged graduated licensing system (G1, G2, G) would still be used, with time in each period remaining the same as today but updated with modern and more effective testing approaches. In the coming months, the province will engage industry leaders and stakeholders on updates to G-Class testing to better reflect the skills drivers need on Ontario roads.

Ontario

Enhancing Mobility, Access and Road Safety

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Developing a New Ontario Trails Strategy	Ontario's scenic trails attract visitors from across the province, Canada and around the world. The province's trails support active communities and contribute to local economies, but its Trails Strategy has not been updated since 2005 and does not fully reflect their tourism and economic potential. Fragmented responsibilities limit coordinated planning. Ontario has an opportunity, through consultation and a new strategy, to better connect trails with communities and local businesses, improve safety and accessibility, attract more visitors and elevate the province as a premier, all-season tourism destination.	The Ontario government will be developing a new Trails Strategy to help strengthen the province's position as a premier, all-season tourism destination and support recreation and local economic growth. The strategy will be focused on a more coordinated, accessible and tourism-focused trail network that boosts tourism and economic development. The province will consult and engage with municipalities, Indigenous partners, non-profit organizations and other trail partners over the next few months to shape the strategy, expected to launch in 2027. Through this collaboration, Ontario aims to have a strategy that elevates the visitor experience through enhanced digital mapping, improved integration of trails in tourism planning, greater connectivity and destination development.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth Overview

In response to changing global and local pressures, the province is supporting northern and rural sustainability and growth through actions that work to foster economic development, while safeguarding local communities and the environment by:

- Advancing northern and rural economic development
- Improving natural resource management
- Transforming permitting processes

Through proposed actions such as strengthening the *Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Act*, streamlining program implementation at Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness (OMAFA) and strengthening ministerial authorities for rural programs and advisory bodies, the province is creating a more responsive and efficient program delivery framework that supports economic development.

Ontario is also working to ensure sustainable economic growth and job creation in rural Ontario are achieved, while maintaining strong environmental stewardship through proposed initiatives such as renewing its Invasive Species Strategy.

Lastly, as part of its plan to protect Ontario and build the most competitive economy in the G7, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) is proposing changes to transform and streamline natural resource permits, allowing mining and infrastructure projects to move forward faster and with greater certainty. These proposals will eliminate an estimated 21,000 days in administrative burden and save businesses over $500,000 in annual compliance costs, complementing recent permit reform initiatives in the government's proposed *Building Ontario Faster Act, 2026.*

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Strengthening the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC)	The NOHFC supports economic growth in Northern Ontario by investing in businesses, communities and organizations. In response to trade disruptions, the NOHFC refocused to prioritize investments that protect northern jobs and industries, strengthen economic resilience and position Northern Ontario for long-term growth and competitiveness. Currently, the Vice-Chair's authority is not set out in the *Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Act* legislation and any authority exercised by the Vice-Chair relies on the Vice-Chair's appointment to the position by the Chair, as set out in the NOHFC's governance instruments.	The proposed amendments to the *Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Act* would, if passed, establish a Vice-Chair position and the designation process in legislation, as well as give the Vice-Chair the authority to act in the place of the Chair in certain circumstances. The province is also proposing to add a new guidance section to the *Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Act,* which if passed, would formalize the NOHFC's mandate as prioritizing economic initiatives that promote economic development, innovation, job growth or strategic community enhancement for the benefit of Northern Ontario's people, industries or communities.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Strengthening Ministerial Authorities for Rural Economic Development Programs and Advisory Bodies	The Rural Economic Development Advisory Panel (REDAP) and Rural Ontario Development (ROD) Program play an important role in strengthening rural communities across the province, but currently both operate under different authorities linked to the *Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Act*. As REDAP's mandate is linked to the ROD Program, it is important to consider the authorities for both the advisory panel and the ROD Program in parallel.	Ontario is proposing to update the oversight framework for the REDAP and the ROD Program to be governed by the Ministry of Rural Affairs (MRA). This change will provide the Minister of Rural Affairs with the authority to establish a governance framework that supports rural economic development, including the authority to establish, maintain and amend rural economic development programs and establish new advisory bodies. Strengthening ministerial authorities will help ensure rural economic development programs and advisory bodies operate with clear accountability, strong coordination and alignment with provincial priorities. This will support responsive and effective program delivery, helping rural communities remain strong, competitive and resilient. As part of this initiative, MRA would rename REDAP as the Rural Ontario Advisory Panel (ROAP). The panel's function and membership would remain unchanged.

Ontario

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Formally Designating Rural Ontario Week	In April 2026, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario unanimously passed a private member's motion to designate the third week of September every year as Rural Ontario Week. A private member's motion expresses the opinion of the Legislature but does not create binding law.	Establishing Rural Ontario Week in legislation will build on the motion by providing permanence, clarity and legal recognition for Rural Ontario Week. This would create a consistent and enduring mechanism to recognize the contributions and value of rural communities to Ontario's economic and social prosperity.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Renewing the Ontario Invasive Species Strategy	Invasive species pose significant risks to Ontario's biodiversity, economy and communities, and impact multiple sectors including agriculture, fisheries, forestry, recreation and tourism. Left unmanaged, many of their impacts can be costly and irreversible. In 2019, it was estimated that invasive species have the potential to cost Ontario $3.6 billion annually. Ontario faces an increased risk of invasive species introduction and spread due to its high population density and geography, including proximity to international land and water shipping routes. A 2023 review of progress identified that while significant advancement has been made through the province's current Invasive Species Strategic Plan, there is a need for continued and coordinated action to address growing pressures from emerging and expanding invasive species threats.	The Ontario government will be implementing a renewed framework for invasive species management to address the ongoing threat of invasive species in Ontario. The strategy will provide a renewed framework for invasive species management, building on past successes and identifying new areas of focus that reflect an improved understanding about the growing risks associated with invasive species, the best available science and current conditions, including: • A stronger articulation of economic costs, sectoral risks and cost-benefit of action • Enhanced partnerships to leverage on the ground actions • Clearer roles and responsibilities to improve coordination and leadership among governments and partners By preventing new invasive species and managing those already established, the renewed strategy aims to reduce and avoid long-term environmental and economic costs across key sectors, while also supporting job creation and economic activity across Ontario.

Ontario

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation Overview

The introduction of the *Protect Ontario's Northern and Rural Communities Act, 2026*, continues to deliver on our commitment to transform government permits and processes to increase competitiveness and strengthen investment opportunities across Northern and rural Ontario.

These proposals complement recent permit reform initiatives in the government's proposed *Building Ontario Faster Act, 2026*, eliminating an estimated 21,000 days in administrative burden and saving businesses over $500,000 in annual compliance costs.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Permitting Transformation: Consent to Deposit - Dry Hydrants	Dry hydrants provide essential, non-pressurized, year-round fire protection in areas that lack access to municipal water supplies. Currently, approval from MNR is required under the *Public Lands Act* to install a dry hydrant on public land, even though the activity is considered low-risk.	The Ontario government is proposing regulatory amendments under the *Public Lands Act* that, if approved, would allow dry hydrants to be installed and used on public land without requiring site-specific MNR approval, provided the work is registered and carried out in accordance with regulatory requirements. A separate work permit would also no longer be required for minor dredging or filling activities associated with dry hydrant installation. These proposed changes are anticipated to save approximately 50 days in overall processing time and improve fire safety in rural and remote areas.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Permitting Transformation: Scalers Licence Renewal and Forest Resource Processing Facility Licence (FRPFL) Renewal	The current processes for obtaining and maintaining a scaler's licence and a Forest Resource Processing Facility Licence (FRPFL) require applicants to complete an application and submit a fee payment by cheque through the mail. An FRPFL is required to build or operate a mill, such as a pulp and paper mill, sawmill or veneer mill, that consumes 1,000 cubic metres or more of wood per year. Scalers are individuals who measure forest resources such as trees or wood to determine volume and quality. MNR currently issues scaler's licences that are valid for five years and have fees for renewal. For both FRPFL and scaler's licences, applicants are currently required to submit paper applications and fee payments by cheque. This process is inefficient, creates unnecessary red tape and results in added administrative burden for both clients and government staff.	The Ontario government is proposing regulatory amendments under the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act* that would eliminate renewal fees for scaler's licences and allow licence holders to renew digitally instead of submitting paper applications and cheque payments. This would make renewals faster and easier while continuing to support accurate timber measurement by qualified scalers. In addition, changes would eliminate annual fees and simplify renewals for Forest Resource Processing Facility licences. This would allow most existing licence holders to renew their licences through online registration and annual reporting, without requiring MNR approval. Only facilities that will continue to operate without significant changes to their scale or products would qualify for the streamlined permit by rule renewal process. Any significant changes to facilities will still require MNR approval. These proposed changes are anticipated to save approximately $4,200 in total per year for all licenced facilities and approximately $1,700 in total per year for all licenced scalers. Moving forward they will have time savings estimated at: • ~10 min for FRPFL permit-by-rule renewal • ~15 min for FRPFL annual fee removal • ~20 min for scaler's licence renewal with fee removal and digital application

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Permitting Transformation: Streamlining Forest Resource Licence Renewals	Forest companies require a Forest Resource Licence to harvest timber and other forest resources on Crown land. These forest company applicants must contact their local MNR office to renew the licence, creating administrative work for both industry and government.	The Ontario government is proposing legislative amendments to the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act* that would allow the ministry to develop regulatory amendments to grant forest companies with existing licences that are in good standing the authority to renew a Forest Resource Licence without waiting for MNR approval through a permit-by-rule approach. Instead of contacting a local MNR office, eligible licence holders could renew licences online by registering and meeting the requirements set out in regulation. These proposed changes are anticipated to save approximately 480 days annually across all licence renewals.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Permitting Transformation: Public Lands Approvals and Management	MNR manages and regulates more than 300,000 kilometres of roads on public lands, which are generally open to public use. In some cases, roads may be closed under the *Public Lands Act* and any travel on a closed road requires a travel permit to be approved by the local MNR district manager. Currently, no service standard for the issuance of these travel permits exists, which can lead to delays for proponents.	The Ontario government is proposing amendments under the *Public Lands Act* that would allow MNR to streamline the current travel permit framework and/or remove permit requirements for certain individuals. It would not apply to roads that may be closed under the *Wildland Fire Management Act*. This proposal would impact people and businesses including, but not limited to, people who require access to operate a dam, licensed trappers, remote tourism operators and mining claim holders. These changes would help streamline travel permit requirements by providing the Minister with regulation-making authority regarding closed roads on public lands and related travel permits to create clear timelines for permit approval. If approved, the ministry would be able to focus time on more complex approvals to ensure they are issued appropriately to help protect and mitigate impacts on the environment, for example, special protected lands or natural areas to preserve biodiversity, cultural heritage and ecological functions.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Permitting Transformation: Trees Reserved to the Crown on Private Land	Some private landowners own the surface rights to their property but do not own some or all of the trees on it. These cases are a result of historical Crown land grants which sometimes transferred ownership of the land to landowners while reserving some or all trees to the Crown. This legacy ownership arrangement remains on some private properties, mainly in Northern Ontario. As a result, these private landowners must either obtain a license and pay applicable fees under the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act* or apply to MNR to have the tree reservation released and pay the required fees under the *Public Lands Act.* Where the Crown no longer has an ownership interest in the trees, the tree reservation is void by law and landowners may request a voidance certificate from MNR confirming that the Crown no longer has an interest in the trees.	The Ontario government is proposing legislative amendments to end this legacy ownership arrangement by transferring ownership of Crown-reserved trees to the underlying private landowners. This would align tree ownership with other private land where landowners own the trees, removing the associated MNR licence, reservation-release and voidance-certificate processes. Existing environmental, species protection and land-use requirements would continue to apply, including municipal tree-cutting by-laws, where they exist. Landowners would remain responsible for meeting these requirements. If passed, these proposed changes are anticipated to save approximately 4,560 days in overall processing time, eliminating administrative burden on ~40 transactions per year, including ~$640,000 in savings annually.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Permitting Transformation: Authorization to Address Bird Nests and Eggs	Bird nests can sometimes create safety risks, such as on power lines, telecommunications towers or navigation equipment, and may need to be removed. Authorization from MNR is required to address the nest or eggs of a wild bird species in Ontario.	The Ontario government is proposing to address situations where an immediate fire hazard is posed by a bird nest through a regulatory amendment under the *Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act* that would remove the requirement for MNR authorization to address the nest or eggs of a wild bird species when the nest poses an immediate fire hazard, if the work follows the code of practice. If approved, the proposed change is anticipated to save approximately 55 days per year in overall processing time and allow public safety and fire risks to be addressed more quickly.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Permitting Transformation: Removal of Forest Resources for Non-forestry Purposes	The removal of trees on Crown land for some non-forestry activities, such as roads, mining and utility corridors, are subject to approval under more than one Act, including under the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act*. This is duplicative and burdensome.	The Ontario government is proposing a regulatory amendment under the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act* that would streamline tree removal for non-forestry activities on Crown land by using a code of practice for smaller projects and a permit-by-rule approach for larger projects. If approved, projects that already have approval under certain other legislation could remove trees without applying for a separate permit, if they meet the requirements of the new framework. This would reduce duplication, simplify the process and lower administrative burden. Applicants who cannot meet the requirements would still be able to apply for a permit. The proposed change is anticipated to save approximately 2,250 days per year in overall processing time.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Permitting Transformation: Fish and Wildlife Approvals	Some infrastructure or development projects which may impact fish and wildlife may require MNR approval. The collection of fish and wildlife is common during the early phases of these projects and MNR works with development proponents to ensure appropriate mitigation measures are in place. These collections require MNR approval to ensure proper capture, holding and relocation techniques are used. In addition, MNR approval is required for some specific activities to deal with wildlife to protect property. For example, an authorization is required to remove a beaver dam that is resulting in flooding of property.	The Ontario government is proposing legislative amendments that would streamline permissions by introducing a new registration-based licence for certain routine fish and wildlife activities. This would expand the circumstances under which people may address wildlife that pose risks to property, infrastructure or public safety without a licence or authorization. The proposed changes would help remove red tape by eliminating or reducing time and effort for clients and MNR to review and process approvals for routine, low-risk fish and wildlife related activities. Examples of routine, low-risk activities include: • Collecting and moving fish and wildlife in low-risk situations • Allowing beaver dams to be removed without authorization in some low-risk situations by following rules set out in regulation • Allowing property owners to address deer or elk if they pose imminent danger to the property Approval processes would remain in place for other higher risk and impact fish and wildlife related activities. Once implemented, these proposed changes are anticipated to save approximately 1,064 days on average per permit type.

Northern and Rural Sustainability and Growth: Red Tape Reduction and Permitting Transformation

Initiative	Current State	Future State
Streamlining the Program Implementation Process at OMAFA	In addition to the applicable policy and fiscal approvals, the *Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Act* currently requires OMAFA to have a Minister's Order to establish any new program. OMAFA is the only ministry that needs to have Minister's Orders to establish programs. Minister's Orders create duplicative processes, requiring administrative effort and amendments for program changes. This reduces operational efficiency and limits the ministry's ability to streamline program delivery without providing meaningful additional risk protection.	Ontario is proposing to remove the need for Minister's Orders to establish OMAFA programs. This will reduce administrative burden and streamline processes. It will also improve responsiveness and enable ministry staff to focus on work that supports Ontario's agri-food and agribusiness sectors. This change addresses an outdated historical administrative burden unique to OMAFA and aligns with Ontario's red tape reduction efforts. There are other existing oversight measures that will continue to provide appropriate accountability and risk management, including Treasury Board/Management Board of Cabinet approvals, financial administration requirements, program governance processes and internal controls.

Appendix – Previous Announcements

- November 18: Ontario Cracking Down on Excessive Vehicle Noise
- November 20: Ontario and Canada Investing $250 Million to Build New Port Facility in Sault Ste. Marie

Ontario