

Media Backgrounder

Improving Ontario's Conservation Authority System



**PROTECT
ONTARIO**

Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks

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Ontario 

Table of Contents

1 Overview: Ontario's conservation authority system

2 The need for action; Actions to date

3 Why consolidation

4 Guiding principles

5 Our plan

6 Regional CA boundaries

7 Governance; CAs and municipalities

8 Transition process

9 Next steps

10 Summary

1. Overview: Ontario's conservation authority system

The Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) administers the *Conservation Authorities Act* (CAA) and is responsible for overseeing Ontario's 36 existing conservation authorities (CAs).

CAs play a vital role in **watershed management** and protecting communities from **natural hazards** like floods. They also deliver programs and services that further the conservation, restoration, and management of natural resources.

CAs issue **permits** to builders, municipalities, and property owners for development activities such as housing developments and installation of sewage systems in areas affected by risks of natural hazards such as floodplains, shorelines, river and stream valleys, and wetlands. Permitting helps to ensure that development does not happen in unsafe areas and that it does not worsen the impacts of flooding or erosion in surrounding areas.

What is a watershed?

A watershed is an area of land that drains all the streams and rainfall into a common outlet, such as a lake, bay or river.

2. The need for action

The Ontario government is taking action to protect Ontario's economy, workers, and communities by making the province the best place in the G7 to invest, create jobs, and do business. To achieve this, the government is making investments to build local infrastructure and taking action to bring more consistency and transparency to the cost and timelines of building homes.

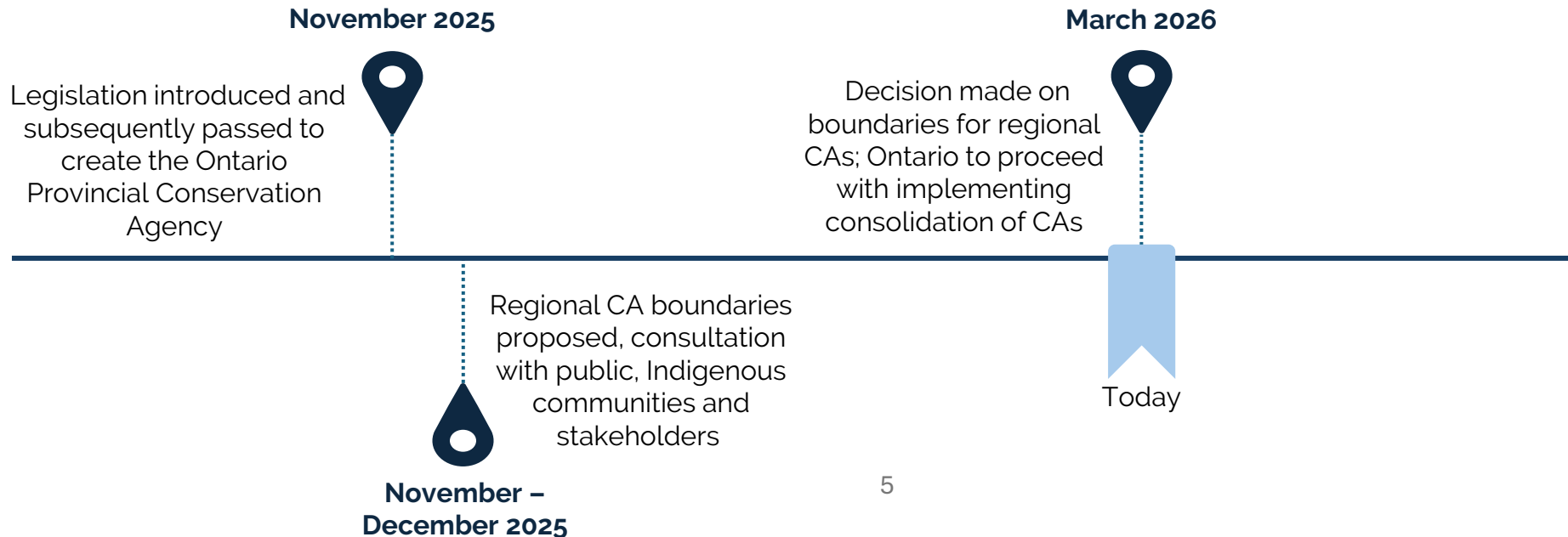
CAs are independent, local public sector organizations with significant variation in capacity, governance, transparency, and reliance on municipal funding. Over time, this has created a fragmented system with inconsistent standards and timelines.

Key challenges under the current framework that this proposal seeks to address include:

- **A patchwork of standards, service delivery:** Each CA has different policies, customer service standards, fees, processes and staffing, and technical capacity leading to unpredictable and inconsistent turnaround times for approvals across all CAs. This can result in uncertainty and delays for builders, landowners, and farmers seeking permits.
- **Outdated and fragmented data systems:** Lack of resources has led to discrepancies in the tools and technology that CAs use, leading to varying types and quality of technology and data management. This can compromise effective provincewide flood risk management and evidence-based decision making.
- **Administrative duplication:** Under the current framework, municipalities are forced to fund duplicate corporate functions (e.g., procurement, communications), diverting costs away from front-line conservation and service delivery.
- **Need for more accountability and transparency:** Lack of transparent asset management and inconsistent performance monitoring and reporting.

2. Actions to date

- Ontario is making progress on its commitment to enhance the effectiveness of CAs, creating more consistency and modern standards and ensuring CAs remain strong, effective and ready to meet today's challenges. Since announcing our plan in fall 2025, we have passed legislation to create the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency (OPCA) to provide centralized leadership and oversight of regional CAs including coordinating a smooth and organized consolidation and key initiatives to improve the CA system and we consulted extensively on the proposed regional CA boundaries.
- Consultations included virtual sessions with CAs, municipalities, stakeholders, and Indigenous communities, and regional workshops with CA and municipal leadership led by the Chief Conservation Executive and the Minister. More than 500 people participated, and 14,000+ comments were submitted on the proposed boundaries. We listened and used this feedback to strengthen our plan.
- The government is now moving forward with a framework for the regional consolidation of Ontario's 36 CAs into 9 optimized regional CAs that would deliver faster, more efficient, and more cost-effective outcomes for the communities that they serve. In the coming weeks, the government plans to introduce amendments to the CAA that would set out and enable the framework for consolidation of Ontario's CAs.



3. Why consolidation

Under the current system, more than half of all municipalities in areas served by CAs fall within the jurisdiction of two or more CAs, resulting in unnecessary duplication that diverts resources from front line conservation work and service delivery. Individual CAs have significant disparities in size and resources, with some lacking access to the latest tools and technology that support flood risk management and evidence-based decision making.

Consolidation would enable more consistent service delivery and more efficient resource and information sharing, making CAs more responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

What these changes would mean:

- More resources for front-line services
- Improved flood management and erosion prevention
- Strong environmental protections maintained
- Faster permit approvals
- Modern service delivery
- Consistent standards and use of modern technology

What's not changing:

- Where CAs operate (areas currently served by CAs will continue to be served by CAs)
- The programs and services CAs provide, including the responsibility for source water protection, natural hazard and watershed management
- CA management of their lands and trails, providing access to green spaces, recreation and education programs
- Where and how CAs receive funding
- CA relationships with municipalities, developers, landowners
- Each CA being an independent, municipally-governed organization

4. Guiding principles

- The following principles informed the actions the province is taking to improve CAs, in addition to feedback heard during consultation:
 - **Retain local influence** – ensure local knowledge, expertise and interests inform the watershed management and conservation work of CAs
 - **Maintain CA watershed-based jurisdictions** – align with natural hydrological boundaries to support flood/water management. Align with drinking water source protection regions
 - **Reduce administrative overlap and duplication** – streamline requirements and processes for municipalities and conservation authorities
 - **Strengthen CA capacity** – improve and standardize the level of expertise and resources across CAs. Seek to balance the needs and interests of urban, rural, northern and southern watersheds
 - **Continuity of services** – minimize disruptions to CA operations and staffing, ensuring uninterrupted delivery of key programs such as permits, watershed management and trails and recreation for public use
 - **Improve customer service** – enhance consistency and clarity in process and timelines

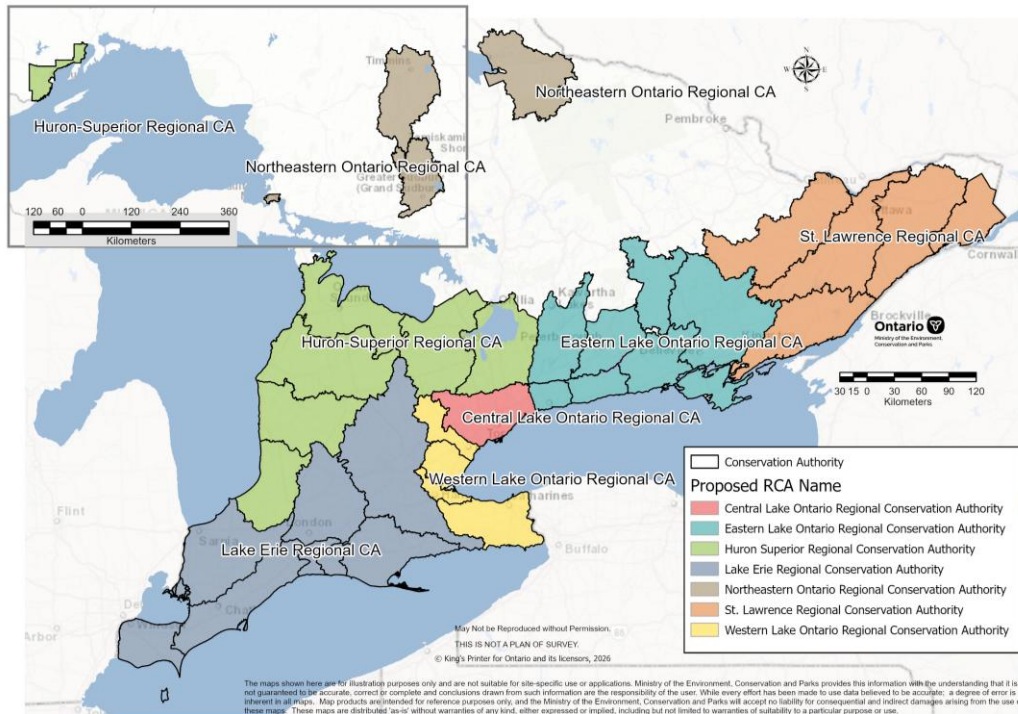
5. Our plan: Improving Ontario's conservation authority system

- The plan is for CA consolidation to take effect early 2027, allowing for transition planning to occur throughout 2026, coordinated by OPCA. Over time, OPCA would further transform Ontario's CA system by developing a single digital permitting platform to provide a faster, more predictable approvals process and improved customer service.
- Temporary guardrails would apply to extraordinary financial, asset or employment decisions to mitigate risk and ensure a stable transition to the new regional structure.
- To ensure service continuity and limit disruptions, and as informed by consultation feedback, the planned amendments, if passed, set out that OPCA would coordinate successful consolidation by:
 - Establishing Transition Committees for each regional CA being consolidated with key representatives from each of the CAs.
 - Appointing a Project Executive that would chair the Transition Committee and become the inaugural Chief Administrative Officer of the regional CA for up to 24 months.
 - Providing resources, tools and guidance to support transition efforts for each regional CA being consolidated.
- To support regional CAs throughout the transition, the province is providing annual funding to OPCA in the amount of \$3 million, beginning in 2026. This funding would be used by OPCA to support regional CAs as needed during transition. Post-transition, this annual funding would support OPCA to help regional CAs achieve improvements and program standards set by the OPCA.

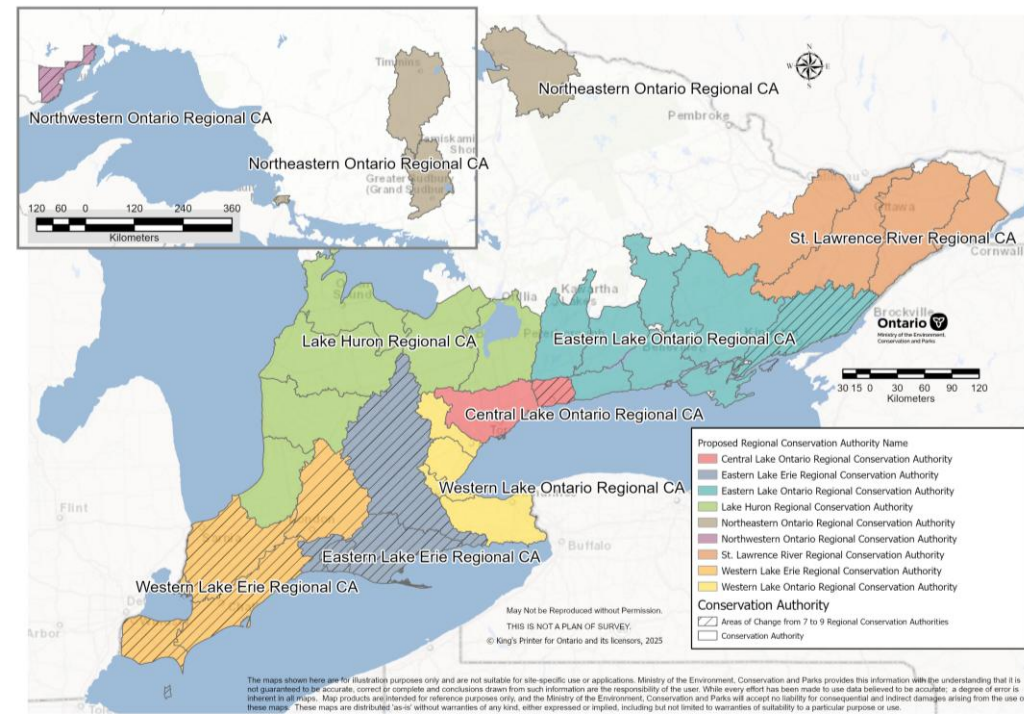
6. Regional CA boundaries

- The regional CA boundaries have been adjusted and refined (from 7 to 9). The feedback received during consultation directly informed the adjustments made to the final regional CA boundaries, which have been optimized to:
 - Accommodate areas with distinct geographies and development contexts
 - Balance differing priorities across rural, urban and northern areas
 - Better align with watersheds and with source protection regions

Proposed 7 Regional Conservation Authorities



Final Optimized 9 Regional Conservation Authorities



7. Governance

- Consistent with previous commitments and feedback heard, regional CAs would continue to be municipally governed organizations.
- Under our plan, participating municipalities that are responsible for appointing members (i.e. “the board”) and for paying CA levies would be at the upper-tier (i.e., regional municipalities and counties) and single-tier (e.g., cities, towns, etc.). This change would mean that lower-tier municipalities (e.g., towns and townships, etc.) within a county would no longer be participating municipalities, as is currently the case where there is a county as the upper-tier municipality.
- Rules for how members are to be selected would be set out in regulation based on each participating municipality's percentage of the population in the regional CA's jurisdiction. Small municipalities are ensured representation by requiring that each participating municipality appoint at least one member.
- Rules for the number of members may also include:
 - Capping total number of members on a CA board.
 - Potentially limiting any one municipality's number of members (e.g., to 5) to ensure balanced representation.
- In response to feedback that emphasized the need for regional CAs to continue to rely on the deep local expertise, knowledge, and relationships built, the province plans to require that regional CAs create one or more local Watershed Councils to ensure watershed management continues to be informed by local knowledge and input. Specific requirements for membership composition of Watershed Councils may be set out in regulation (e.g. Indigenous representatives) to enable considering Indigenous knowledge, as well as agriculture and development representation to consider other local watershed perspectives).

*Municipalities and associated numbers represent “participating municipalities” for CAs both in the current state and once consolidated.

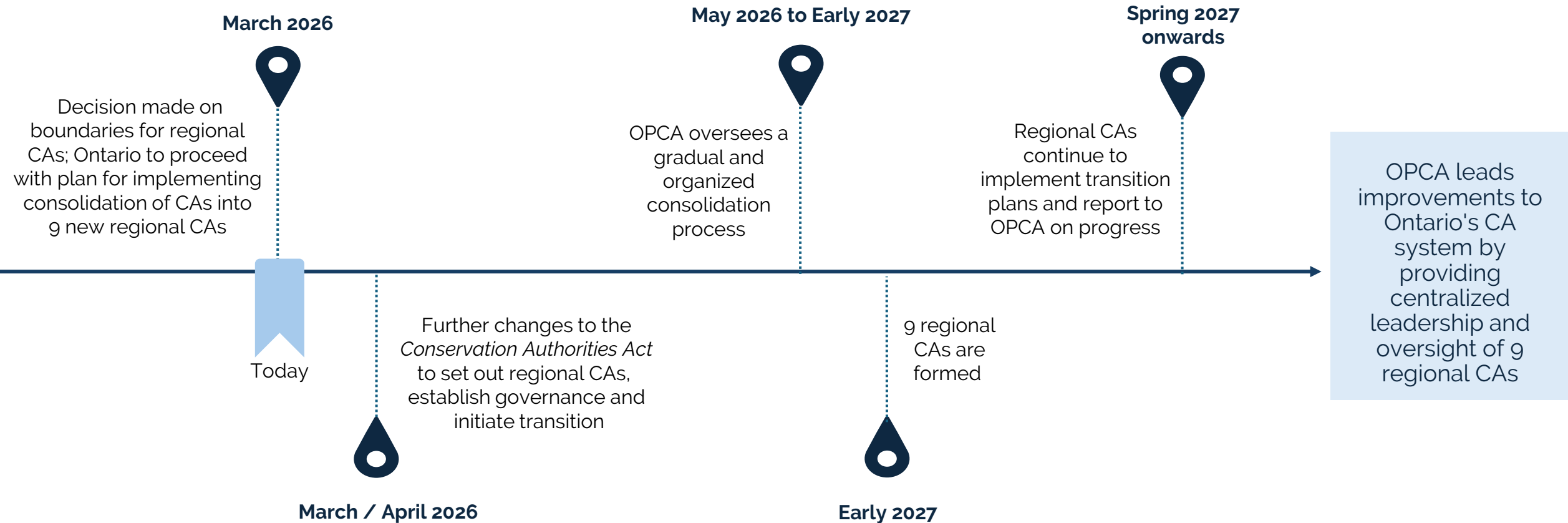
7. Governance – CAs and municipalities

Regional consolidation of CAs would result in a reduction in the number of municipalities that belong to multiple CAs. This would empower Ontario's CAs in delivering faster, more efficient, and more cost-effective outcomes for the communities they serve.

| | Current State Regions, single-tier, lower-tier | Consolidated Regions, counties, single-tier | % Change |
|---|--|---|-----------------|
| Number of CAs | 36 | 9 | 75% |
| Municipalities part of 1 CA | 126 | 57 | 55% |
| Municipalities part of ≥ 2 CAs | 60 | 16 | 73% |
| Municipalities part of ≥ 3 CAs | 19 | 4 | 79% |
| Municipalities part of ≥ 4 CAs | 3 | 1 | 67% |
| Municipalities part of ≥ 5 CAs | 2 | 0 | 100% |

Note: Municipalities and associated numbers represent "participating municipalities" for CAs both in the current state and once consolidated. There is no change in the total number of municipalities that are within a CA's jurisdiction.

8. The transition process



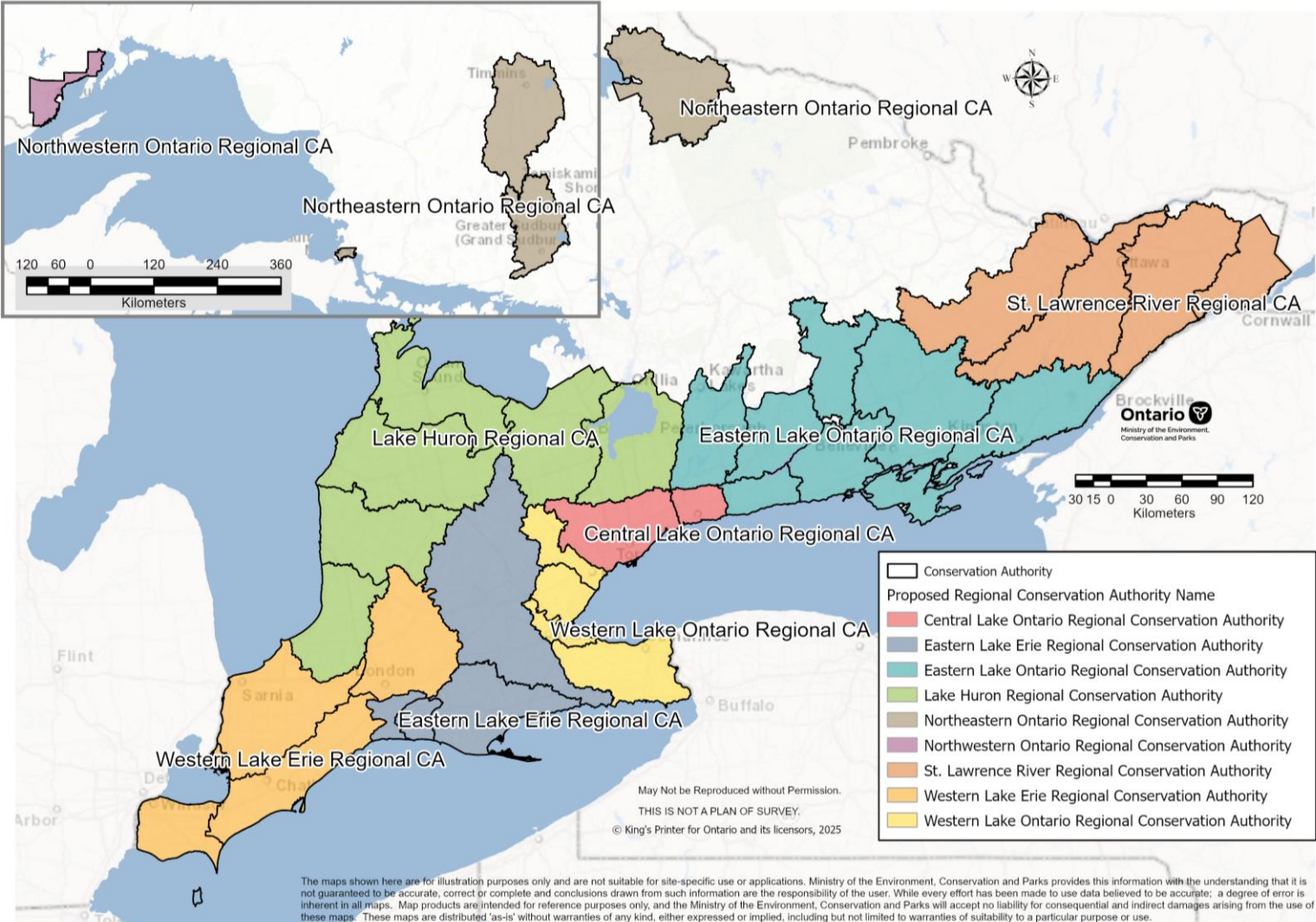
9. Next steps

- In the coming weeks and months, the provincial government plans to:
 - Propose further amendments to the *Conservation Authorities Act* (CAA) that, if passed, sets out the provincially led amalgamation of the 36 existing conservation authorities to create 9 regional CAs, including transitional governance and activities to be coordinated by the OPCA .
 - Engage with CAs, municipalities, Indigenous communities and other interested partners to provide updates about the government's plans and consolidation.
 - Support the OPCA to coordinate transition planning for consolidation to take effect early 2027, with minimal disruptions/interruptions to CAs' services and staffing.
 - The amendments would result in an improved CA system creating greater consistency and transparency and delivering strengthened services to municipalities and permit applicants, while ensuring decisions continue to be based on sound science and with local advice.

10. Summary

- Ontario's current CA system is fragmented, with inconsistent standards and timelines across 36 individual CAs that can slow down development approvals and risks hampering CAs' abilities to protect their communities from floods and other natural hazards.
- Since announcing our plan in fall 2025, we have consulted extensively. We listened and used this feedback to strengthen our plan, and we are now ready to move forward with plans to introduce amendments to the CAA that would set out and enable the consolidation of Ontario's 36 CAs to create 9 new regional CAs, targeted to take effect in early 2027.
- With centralized leadership and independent oversight of CAs by the new Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, Ontario's CA system will provide streamlined, consistent, and improved service delivery without any reduction in environmental standards. These changes will better position CAs to support needed housing and infrastructure projects more efficiently while continuing to protect communities from flooding and other natural hazards, fulfilling provincially mandated programs such as drinking water source protection under the *Clean Water Act*, and managing CA-owned lands and recreational trails so that Ontarians have access to local natural areas and outdoor activities.

Appendix: Boundaries for Ontario's 9 new regional CAs*



*Plan is for this to take effect in early 2027, subject to amendments being proposed to the *Conservation Authorities Act*

Appendix: Ontario's Current 36 CAs

