

Province allocates \$16 million to combat invasive species Ontario-wide



Combatting invasive species has been a costly operation for local governments and community organizations alike ? and now, the Province of Ontario will kick in \$16 million over three years to help conservation authorities, Indigenous communities and municipalities in the fight.

The new funding was announced in Newmarket on Thursday by Graydon Smith, Minister of Natural Resources, who was joined by MPPs Dawn Gallagher Murphy and Daisy Wai, Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas, and representatives from the Invasive Species Centre and Nature Conservancy of Canada.

Both organizations will administer the funding, designed to support an Ontario-wide plan to fight a range of invasive species, including phragmites, which has become a problem in wetlands across the Province.

?Invasive species are one of the main threats to biodiversity in Ontario,? said Minister Smith. ?They put our native fish, plants, animals and their habitat at risk. Ontario has the highest number of invasive species in Canada. Once established, these invasives can harm the natural environment and they threaten our economy. Impacts to agriculture, fisheries, forestry, healthcare, tourism and the recreation industry are estimated to be \$3.6 billion each year in our Province.?

This newly-announced funding, he said, is an increase of \$12 million net new spending.

\$11 million will be allocated for the Invasive Phragmites Control Fund with the balance going to the Invasive Species Action Fund, which provides grants to ?manage? invasive species beyond phragmites.

?Today's announcement is just part of our government's efforts to further prevent the introduction and the spread of invasive species in the Province,? the Minister continued. ?We recently added 10 new non-native species and four groups of species under the act, we're renewing the Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan, but we can't fight invasives alone. Our partners are key to managing and stopping the spread of invasive species in our Province. Organizations like the Invasive Species Centre, the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the other members of the Green Shovels Collaborative are at the forefront of our fight against invasives. I want to thank them for their dedication and hard work. I'd like to thank the organizations that support them in that work.?

York Region, he added, has been at the ?forefront? of the battle against invasive species for ?many years,? and welcoming the announcement on behalf of York Regional Chair Wayne Emmerson was Mayor Mrakas, who said emerging invasive species pose a threat to ?thousands of plants and animals.?

“As York Region's population continues to grow to an anticipated two million residents by 2051, managing and removing invasive species will become increasingly difficult and costly,” he said. “We know that invasive species can cause severe, costly and often permanent damage to important habitats, ecosystems and properties and can pose a health and safety risk to our residents. We have seen firsthand the significant damage invasive species have caused through the York Regional Forest as dog-strangling vine, Manitoba maple, garlic mustard and European Buckthorn are well established in our tracts.

“We work hard on the ground to manage invasive species, monitoring, pruning and even pulling plants by hand, and complement other infrastructure-related activities such as upgrading drinking water systems, regularly cleaning water intakes and removing and replacing hazardous trees on Regional property. We see the harsh effects towards our trees, wetlands, woodlands, grasslands, lakes, rivers and streams. These features are critical as they provide habitat for wildlife, clean the air and water, and prevent flooding. Maintaining a healthy, sustainable environment is a top priority for York Regional Council and this is only possible when we work together and collaborate with senior governments and community partners.”

According to the Invasive Species Centre, the cost of combatting invasive species is felt most on the community level, and in addition to the aforementioned invasive species, potential future threats such as oak wilt and spotted lantern fly are “on the horizon.”

“This is an important moment in time to protect our [environment and] prevent future economic and environmental losses,” said Colin Cassin, the Centre's Policy Manager. “But we also have reason to be hopeful and optimistic. We are delighted with these new investments that are going to catalyze community-based local action all across the Province on invasive species. With this new investment in this year alone, we're going to be able to support more than 80 community-based projects through the Invasive Species Action Fund happening all across the Province of Ontario. We will be able to support more projects still through the invasive phragmites control fund this year. These projects are going to build on the dozens of projects that have already been happening over the last four years thanks to the Ministry of Natural Resources' support that support community-based action through granting programs.”

Added Dana Kleniewski, the Nature Conservancy of Canada's Regional Vice President for Ontario: “We must care for our lands and the species they sustain. Phragmites has been recognized as Canada's worst invasive plant species and one of the most significant threats to great lakes coastal habitats. Like any species, phragmites does not respect property boundaries and that is why collaborative solutions are needed right across the landscape. This is ambitious work, it is urgently needed, and it cannot happen without collaboration.”

By Brock Weir