

SUB-COMMITTEE REPORT

To: Ecological and Environmental Advisory Committee
Date: January 8, 2002
Subject: **Halton Official Plan Review – Technical Background Report #6, Significant Woodlands**

Background

As a component of its five-year Official Plan Review, the RM of Halton initiated a process in 2000 to identify "Significant Woodlands" within its municipal boundaries. This requirement is specified in Policy 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 of the Provincial Policy Statement (1997). The Natural Heritage Reference Manual for Policy 2.3 of the PPS (OMNR, 1999) directs that identification and evaluation of significant woodlands is a planning authority responsibility. The manual provides suggested criteria to consider during the significant woodland identification process

Seven criteria were applied during the process to identify those woodlands in Halton that were under consideration as being significant. The criteria included the following general components:

- * 1. terrain (i.e. woodlands on slopes greater than 10 per cent)
- * 2. groundwater quality and quantity (i.e. woodlands in headwater areas with drainage to first-order streams)
- * 3. surface water quality and quantity (i.e. woodlands within 30m of a water course)
- 4. age
- 5. patch size
- 6. distance from perimeter
- 7. landscape connectivity

Candidate significant woodlands were identified where one or more of the criteria were met. Under this set of criteria, 97% of the total woodlands in the Region met these requirements and were therefore considered to be Candidate Significant Woodlands.

Discussion

While EEAC is in complete agreement of the need for the evaluation and designation of significant woodlands in Halton, the criteria proposed in Technical Background Paper #6 require revision to provide greater scientific rigor and defensibility in support of the policy. While most of the criteria suggested in the Background Paper have a high degree of scientific acceptance, some criteria deviate from the guidelines provided in the Natural Heritage Reference Manual for Policy 2.3 of the Provincial Policy Statement. While deviation from the Reference Manual for identifying Significant Woodlands is permissible in the PPS, a greater weight of technical defensibility will be required on the part of the Region.

To place the forest situation in context, the total wooded area within Halton represents 22.3 to 22.9 % of the land area as indicated in Technical Background Paper #6. Most (75%) of this is located in rural Milton and Halton Hills. The document also indicates that both the federal (Environment Canada) and the provincial governments (MNR and MOE) have set guidelines for good habitat rehabilitation as 30% of the area within a watershed. Other agencies (American

Forests) have recommended that the forest cover be even as high as 40%. This does not even take account of the need for more growing forests to sequester carbon in relation to the global climate change problem. Even though Halton is one of the better communities in southern Ontario with respect to the relative amount of forest cover, the current amount of all forested land in Halton still falls far short of the target of 30% forest cover. More forest needs to be created and those that are present need to be protected, perhaps through a system of well-designed tree by-laws.

With regard to the seven criteria used in the report, each has some degree of merit but that they are not all of equal importance, at least in relation to the process for identification of significant woodlands. Certain of the criteria, namely the first three on the list (Terrain, Groundwater Quality and Quantity and Surface Water Quality and Quantity) are more appropriately applied to other policy issue areas. Protection of these ecological features and functions in respect to woodlands is not solely a woodland issue. Protection of steep slopes (terrain) and ground/surface water quality and quantity should be addressed under separate "Smart Growth" policies. Water quality and quantity are included as a separate policy in the PPS. Table 1 of TBP#6 excludes previously suggested significant woodland criteria related to hydrology and hydrogeology.

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The Natural Heritage Reference Manual suggests additional factor that might be considered during the process to identify significant woodlands but these were not included in the TBP. The following factors were not considered:

- Woodland Diversity: provincially and locally rare forest community types
- Economic and Social Values (in reference manual): in Reference manual, (not required for Halton)

Some figures for the land areas within Halton identified under some level of protection using the Greenlands A or B designation are confusing and appear to be somewhat inconsistent with the size of the areas shown in the maps. Several numbers associated with significant woodlands require clarification, particularly those on Page 53 of TBP#6. Based on the figures, it appears that current Greenlands A and B include >55% of candidate woodlands in the Region. If more specific data were available (i.e. total area covered by each type of environmental protection), it might be easier to understand the impacts of the designations of significant woodlands.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. It is recommended that the criteria for the identification of Significant Woodlands in Halton be revised to include only Criteria 4-7 and that Criteria 1-3 be relocated to other policy issue areas. In the event that the relocation of the three criteria is deemed unacceptable, then they should be returned to the set used to identify significant woodlands in Halton. Criteria 4-7 are consistent with the Natural Heritage Reference Manual for Policy 2.3 of the PPS:

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Proposed Halton Criteria	Suggested Factor in Natural Heritage Reference Manual
Age	Uncommon Characteristics
Woodland Patch Size	Woodland Size

Distance from Perimeter	Ecological Functions (Woodland Shape and Proximity)
Landscape Connectivity	Ecological Functions (Linkages)

Water quantity and quality criteria should be deleted from Significant Woodland criteria as they are already included in the criteria for ESA designation.

2. The criteria with respect to Woodland Diversity: provincially and locally rare forest community types should be specifically applied to the wooded areas to ensure that such significant areas are not overlooked.
3. The protection of agricultural interests with respect to current normal farm practices should be reiterated. More explicit protection of agricultural land uses should be identified in the policy. It is recommended that the specific policy for woodlands should reflect Section 2.3.4 of the Provincial Policy Statement (Nothing in Policy 2.3 [Natural Heritage] is intended to limit continued agricultural land use.
4. The document should focus only on those areas newly identified as significant and limit the discussion of those areas that are subject to other land use designations (ESAs, ANSIs, PSWs, NE). Information on the percentage of woodland that has been identified as significant should be re-calculated accordingly.
5. Clarification between ESA and Significant Woodland criteria should be provided. Several overlapping criteria could create confusion regarding designation. These include:

ESA Criteria	Significant Woodland Criteria
2. Areas that provide functional links among two or more natural areas.	Connectivity with other natural heritage features.
4. Areas that contain large, relatively undisturbed expanses of natural, native plant communities, in particular those that support forest interior conditions.	Interior core area size.

Respectfully submitted,

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Adopted by EEAC as amended (*) February 12, 2003