

This question was sent to some local politicians. Some responses follow.

Ontario's Endangered Species Act (ESA) was recently revised to allow exemptions for some industries from complying with strict protective standards. Critics say this weakens or eliminates protection of threatened plants and animals. What is your position?

Bill Walker, MPP for Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound (Progressive Conservative)

believes the ESA is "out of control." In a statement released in September, he criticized the Ontario government for increasing the number of protected species from 19 in 2003 to 121 in 2013.

"When a farmer is unable to harvest hay because your supposition deems his farmland an endangered turtle habitat, then you're grinding our food production to a halt," he added. Walker wants the Act fixed through "a compulsory economic impacts analysis, publishing scientific analysis with the proposed rules, and making the ESA committee an advisory board to the Minister," who would make final decisions.

"Of course we need to have concern for our endangered species," he stated, "however, we also need to have as much concern for the farmer who is trying to feed his family and make a living."

Kevin Flynn, MPP for Oakville (Ontario Liberal) responds with "Why did the government modernize the Endangered Species Act?"

We wanted to streamline some of our approvals processes to make our business more efficient and sustainable and improve the implementation of the ESA. The regulation changes help avoid duplication and streamline a number of approvals with other planning processes already in place within MNR.

"I am proud of our government's goal of providing individuals and businesses with faster and more efficient service delivery while maintaining protection for and supporting the recovery of species at risk.

"For instance: the changes help existing or already-planned activities proceed without additional approvals under the ESA, subject to conditions, if new species or habitat protection comes into effect after an eligible approval has been obtained. Eligible projects do not require an ESA permit, provided the proponent registers with MNR, and follows rules that have been set out in regulation; the changes enable activities necessary for human health or safety. For example, repairing structural damage to a bridge or road that poses a safety risk does not require an ESA permit as long as the proponent registers the activity with MNR, and follows the rules set out in regulation. We remain committed to ensuring our native species continue to contribute to Ontario's rich biodiversity and that environmental protection and economic development go hand-in-hand.

"At the end of June 2013, the total number of species protected was brought to 215 with the addition of 65 new species. The ESA is the only North American legislation that provides automatic species protection based on the advice of an independent scientific panel, the Committee On the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario. Ontario is and will continue to be a North American leader in species at risk protection."

Ted Arnott, MPP for Wellington-Halton Hills (Progressive Conservative)

writes "We need to find the appropriate balance between the important priorities of protecting endangered species and strengthening our economy. I believe that these goals are not mutually exclusive: we can achieve both.

"The Environmental Commissioner of Ontario, Gord Miller, released his annual report on October 10. In it, he criticizes the current provincial government for 'gutting' the Ministry of Natural Resources such that the Ministry is 'walking away from many parts of its job to safeguard wildlife and natural resources.' Further, his news release states that 'protection for at-risk species have been gutted as major industrial activities can now proceed almost unchecked.'

"The provincial government has an obligation to respond to the Environmental Commissioner's report and recommendations. I would hope that the Government will review his report and respond publicly as soon as possible."

More news about the ESA is on page 9.

Do you have a question for our politicians? Send it to editor@NEViews.ca or mail it to Niagara Escarpment Views, 50 Ann St., Georgetown, ON L7G 2V2 by Dec. 30.

