

A close-up photograph of a person's hands, wearing a red sweater, gently touching the bark of a tree trunk. The bark is covered in patches of orange and black lichen. In the background, a person with long dark hair is partially visible, and a blurred urban landscape with buildings and greenery can be seen under an overcast sky.

ONTARIO'S URBAN FORESTS

CALL TO ACTION



THE NEED FOR GREEN

Urban forests are an important green infrastructure asset for communities across Ontario. However, the capacity of urban forests to support healthy and resilient cities is constrained and challenged by stressors such as climate change impacts, urban development pressures, altered soils, and invasive species. Now more than ever there is a critical need to sustain large, healthy, genetically appropriate trees and shrubs on public and private land through long-term planning and budgeting, inclusive decision-making, and strategic policy development that supports adaptive management. Thus, comprehensive urban forest support must extend well beyond tree planting initiatives.

Management of urban forests is often considered the sole responsibility of municipal governments. In reality, responsibility should also be shared by private citizens, community groups, schools and other institutions, industry and provincial and federal governments. **All of these groups have important roles to play.** Successful management frameworks must recognize that the urban forest is part of a complex system that includes the built environment, and is influenced by human activities and policies and practices that shape Ontario's urban regions. Furthermore, decision-making must be made in the context of future uncertainty associated with climate change.

The Green Infrastructure Ontario Coalition (GIO) is an alliance of businesses, not-for-profit organizations, community groups and local governments working to promote green infrastructure across the province. Ontario's Urban Forests Call to Action is a coordinated approach, led by GIO, which aims to increase the collective capacity of all urban forest stakeholders in the province. This document is intended to:

1. Promote a collective agenda for necessary policy changes.
2. Create a platform for collaborative action towards key strategic priorities.
3. Support the exchange of resources, knowledge and expertise from across the province.

This Call to Action complements existing strategies, policies and documents, and aims to initiate new actions in areas of particular concern to urban forest stakeholders in Ontario. It builds upon past efforts in order to create a cohesive path forward that has broad support from stakeholders across the sector. Many of the strategic priorities outlined in this Call to Action aim to support the tasks outlined in the Canadian Urban Forest Strategy, a national strategic initiative of Canada's urban forest practitioners.

THE STORY SO FAR

Ontario is the birth place of the discipline of urban forestry. The discipline stems from research conducted by Erik Jorgensen at the University of Toronto in 1965. His work first recognized that urban trees provide environmental benefits in addition to amenity and recreational value. A great deal has improved in the urban forest sector over the last 50 years.

| Issue | Progress | Gaps |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Need for effective management frameworks</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several municipalities across Ontario have developed sound urban forest management programs that include all or some of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban forest inventory and canopy mapping • An Urban Forest Management Plan • An Urban Forest Strategy • By-laws • Community engagement and education • Tree nurseries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many municipalities have not yet attempted this work and still lack the resources, policies, and political will needed to fully support a healthy urban forest. • There is a large variance in standards of management practice between municipalities. • Most of the urban forest exists on private property and the majority of the land available for new plantings is privately owned. Municipalities are not equipped with the budget or policy tools needed to support tree establishment and maintenance on private property in a substantive way. • Urban forests are often a low priority in planning decisions related to development and redevelopment. |
| <p>Support for trees on private property</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not-for-profit organizations and community groups are playing an increasingly important role in engaging the community in urban forest stewardship on private lands. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic, sustained, and long-term urban forest stewardship funding, for planting and other stewardship or knowledge gaps, is needed in order to increase community capacity in urban forest management. |
| <p>Coordinated, multi-level governance</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invasive species outbreaks and extreme weather events have exposed the public to high levels of risk which have taxed public response capacity. Mitigating the impacts of these threats through urban forest management programs can serve as a model for senior government coordination. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no coordinated multi-level government urban forestry program to address risk mitigation associated with extreme weather events and invasive species outbreaks in collaboration with other Emergency Management Organizations.. |
| <p>Provincial leadership</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The provincial government has engaged in issue driven and reactive management efforts to urban forest threats (e.g. Emerald Ash Borer and Asian Long-horned Beetle). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for proactive and consistent provincial leadership. Currently, many provincial ministries (including MNRF, MMAH, and MOECC) actively work or depend on urban forestry to help achieve their mandates, yet no one ministry is responsible for urban forests. |
| <p>Awareness about the urban forest</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Science and research activities in other parts of the world, specifically the United States (e.g. USDA Forest Service), have supported urban forest planning and management, provided protocols and information, and in general raised the level of public awareness about the urban forest. • The body of research and literature quantifying the social, ecological, economic and health benefits of urban forests has grown substantially. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for similar urban forest science and research support in Ontario, and a Canadian source for urban forestry information that is readily available to the general public and media. • External stakeholders and the general public have not been overly receptive to the results, except when communicated by an economic authority (eg. “The value of urban forest in cities across Canada” TD Economics Special Report, Sept 24, 2014). Better communication and public education is necessary. |

CALL TO ACTION

The Urban Forest Call to Action was developed in consultation with diverse urban forest stakeholders. It identifies strategic priorities and recommends actions that will assist current and future stakeholders in their efforts to grow, protect, and sustain healthy urban forests.



CALL TO ACTION

| Strategic Priorities | Action | Outcome |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Gain formal multi-level government support and funding for planning and managing the urban forest as crucial urban infrastructure.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document and maintain a current list of specific policy recommendations for the provincial government. • Track progress on provincial policy recommendations. • Encourage action on priority policy recommendations by developing and sharing consistent messaging for use by all stakeholders. • Develop an advocacy toolkit to support stakeholders in their urban forest advocacy efforts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An online list of provincial policy recommendations is utilized and contributed to by stakeholders and updated yearly. • Progress is made and tracked on provincial policy recommendations. • Useful advocacy tools are identified, developed, disseminated, and used by stakeholders in pursuing support and funding for urban forestry. |
| <p>Coordinate action in urban forestry at a provincial scale.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage with the provincial government in the development of an Ontario Urban Forest Strategy. • Conduct a scan of the current urban forest activities and associated operating environment in Ontario. • Develop an interactive map of urban forest plans and strategies, and identify commonalities in vision, goals, barriers, and gaps. • Build partnerships and alliances amongst municipalities, not-for-profit organizations, community groups, businesses, industry, and educational institutions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The provincial government takes a leading role in the development of an Ontario Urban Forest Strategy. • An online network map is published, maintained, and utilized by urban forest stakeholders across the province. • New partnerships are developed by implementing this Call to Action. |
| <p>Support municipalities, landowners, community groups, and other stakeholders in managing Ontario's urban forests.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate and share international and local best practices in urban forestry. • Develop a toolkit of strategies for obtaining provincial funding for urban forestry through existing programs and policies. • Identify mechanisms whereby the Provincial government can support the implementation of best management approaches to urban forest stewardship. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation and distribution of a best management practices manual which is updated at least every five years. • Stakeholders obtain funding for urban forest stewardship through existing provincial programs and policies. • The province identifies a lead ministry for urban forestry and increases its support for municipalities and other stakeholders in the proactive management of Ontario's urban forests. |
| <p>Undertake research and share knowledge, tools, techniques and information</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify critical research questions and information gaps in the Ontario context. • Create an urban forest centre for applied science and research which includes information for the general public and media. • Develop citizen science and civic ecology tools that engage all residents in urban forest monitoring, stewardship and planning. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research gaps are continually identified and addressed through collaborative research. • An urban forest applied research hub and/or centre is created (including strategic links to outside sectors). • Research and tools related to urban forest planning, management, inventory and monitoring are readily available to all stakeholders. |

greeninfrastructureontario.org

Our next step will be working together to determine who will lead the identified actions. We invite all stakeholders to review this Call to Action, find themselves in it, and join the conversation. GIO is committed to making this Call to Action a living document and evaluating our collective success in 2020.

Call to Action supporters:

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