



Rouge River Watershed Plan Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Document Fall 2025 Engagement

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1.0 CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

What is a watershed?

- A watershed is an area that is drained by a river (or creek) and its tributaries. Wherever you are right now, you are in a watershed.

Why are healthy watersheds important?

- Healthy watersheds provide numerous ecosystem services such as supporting biodiversity, providing clean drinking water, reducing flood and erosion hazards, protecting the quality and quantity of water, and improving climate resiliency. Thus, it is important for watershed stakeholders, residents, and decision makers to work collaboratively towards protecting and improving the health of our watersheds.

What is watershed planning?

- Watershed planning provides a systematic and comprehensive framework for ensuring healthy watersheds.
- Watershed planning is carried out to assess and understand current and potential future watershed conditions comprehensively at the watershed scale, and to identify strategic measures and actions to protect, enhance, and restore watershed health and build resiliency to land use and climate changes.
- Watershed planning provides a watershed-based framework for establishing goals, objectives, and direction for the management of the water resources and other integrated natural systems as well as human activities within a watershed to ensure healthy and safe watersheds.
- Watershed planning does not make land use and infrastructure planning decisions. Rather, it is intended to help municipalities make informed decisions on where and how to grow in a way that minimizes and/or mitigates impacts to watershed health. Additionally, watershed planning helps inform other TRCA and municipal initiatives including ecosystem restoration and management, land management/acquisition, best practices for rural land uses, low impact development and green infrastructure implementation, and climate adaptation planning.

Provincial policies recognize the watershed as the ecologically meaningful scale for integrated and long-term planning. The Provincial Planning Statement, 2024, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, 2017, and the Greenbelt Plan, 2017, contain policies on watershed planning. For example, provincial policy encourages municipalities, and requires large and fast-growing municipalities (including the City of Toronto, City of Markham, City of Pickering, and City of Richmond Hill), to undertake watershed planning to inform certain municipal decisions, such as those related to planning for servicing, stormwater management, and the protection, improvement, or restoration of the quality and quantity of water. Municipalities undertaking watershed planning are encouraged to collaborate with conservation authorities.

- Watershed planning provides a comprehensive and integrated approach to understanding natural hazards, water resources, and natural heritage, which is important for effective municipal growth management and to adapt to climate change impacts.

Where is the Rouge River watershed located and what are some watershed highlights?

- The Rouge River watershed is the eastern portion of TRCA's jurisdiction and lies between the Humber and Don Rivers and Highland Creek watersheds (to the west) and Duffins and Petticoat Creek watersheds (to the east).
- The upper portions of the watershed are largely rural and are part of the provincial Greenbelt, and include portions of the Oak Ridges Moraine. The middle portions of the watershed are mostly urbanized and the lower portions within the Rouge Urban National Park are mostly natural.
- The watershed consists of seven subwatersheds including Upper Rouge, Middle Rouge / Beaver Creek, Berczy / Bruce Creek, Robinson / Mount Joy Creek, Upper Little Rouge, Lower Little Rouge, and Lower Rouge.

10.9% of the Rouge River watershed falls within the City of Toronto, 0.6% falls within the Region of Durham (City of Pickering), 88.5% falls within the Region of York (0.5% in the Town of Aurora, 49.8% in the City of Markham, 15.0% in the City of Richmond Hill and 23.2% in the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville).

- The watershed is approximately 33,926 hectares in size.
- The watershed is approximately 36% urban, 38% rural, and 26%, and has 29% impervious cover (as of 2023).
- The Rouge River Watershed holds deep cultural significance, with a history of Indigenous presence dating back over 10,000 years. It is home to ancient trade and travel routes used by First Nations, including the eastern branch of the Toronto Carrying Place Trail, a critical link between Lake Ontario and the northern Great Lakes. The watershed also contains important archaeological sites, such as ancient village locations and burial grounds, which reflect the long-standing relationships Indigenous peoples have with this land. Early European settlement is also visible through 19th-century farmsteads, mills, and historic roads that still shape parts of the landscape today.

Is this the first watershed plan for the Rouge River?

- No, the last watershed plan for the Rouge River ([Rouge River Watershed Plan: Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Future](#)) and its accompanying [Implementation Guide](#) were published in 2007 and 2008, respectively.
- It is important to regularly update watershed plans to review progress from previous plans, reflect current conditions, incorporate the latest watershed science, policies, and best practices, and adjust management approaches.

Why was an updated watershed plan for the Rouge River necessary?

- Periodic reviews of watershed plans are an integral component of the watershed planning process and allow for adaptive management to incorporate new scientific approaches and address emerging issues and initiatives.
- Since the last watershed plan, the watershed has experienced changes associated with urbanization and the impacts of climate change. Since many of the issues identified in the previous watershed plan are still occurring, an updated watershed plan, using the latest advancements in watershed science and monitoring/inventory data as well as modelling/technical analyses, was necessary.
- Watershed plans help inform land use and infrastructure planning decisions, while providing an understanding of the natural systems that sustain watershed health.
- Municipalities recently undertook reviews of their Official Plans to ensure conformity with provincial policies (and some of these reviews are ongoing).

How is the Rouge River Watershed Plan being developed?

- The development of the Rouge River Watershed Plan (RRWP) is a multi-year, collaborative effort between TRCA, Alderville First Nation, Chippewas of Rama First Nation, Hiawatha First Nation, Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, City of Markham, City of Pickering, City of Richmond Hill, City of Toronto, Region of Durham, Region of York, Rouge National Urban Park, Town of Aurora and Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville.
- The development of the watershed plan includes:
 - Field work and technical analyses to identify existing watershed conditions and trends (which will be culminated in the public release of the Rouge River Watershed Characterization Report, targeted for early 2026).
 - Potential future management scenarios modelling and analysis to assess the impacts of a range of potential future land use and climate change scenarios along with varying levels of watershed enhancements (including natural cover, urban forest canopy, and stormwater management enhancements). This information helps us understand how future watershed conditions may change. The Rouge River Watershed Future Management Scenarios Analysis Report is targeted for completion and public release in early 2027.
 - Development of a realistic management framework for the RRWP with goals, objectives, indicators, and management actions outlining how to protect, enhance, and restore watershed health. The management framework will be designed to address existing watershed issues and mitigate impacts from potential future land use and climate changes. The draft RRWP will be released for a 60-day public review period, once available.

- Adoption/endorsement of the RRWP by our partner municipalities (as appropriate) and approval by TRCA's Board of Directors.
- Engagement with First Nations and Indigenous communities that are not participating in the RRWP Steering Committee, as well as with watershed stakeholders, residents, and members of the public, throughout the development of the RRWP.

What is the timeline to develop this watershed plan?

- Work on developing the RRWP commenced in 2024 (Stage 1: Preparation and Scoping). Watershed Characterization (Stage 2) is targeted for completion in 2026, and the Future Management Scenarios (Stage 3) is targeted for completion in 2027. It is anticipated that Implementation Planning (Stage 4) will be completed in 2028.
- Engagement is taking place throughout the RRWP development process and includes a variety of engagement methods including webpage updates, engagement notifications, social media campaigns, surveys/comment forms, participation in various engagement events, and virtual webinars/presentations to build community awareness and obtain input for the watershed plan components.
- The key RRWP documents (including the Watershed Characterization Report and draft RRWP) were/will be circulated to First Nations and Indigenous communities for their input/feedback prior to release to stakeholders, residents, and members of the public.
- The draft RRWP will be available for broader review from watershed stakeholders, residents, and members of the public for a 60-day review period prior to the finalization of the watershed plan.
- The final RRWP will consider all input and feedback received during the engagement period and will be updated accordingly prior to obtaining endorsement/approval from municipal Committees/Councils and TRCA's Board of Directors.
- The RRWP is intended to be in effect for 10 years from when it is finalized and approved.
- Through regular and ongoing monitoring, research, reporting, and adaptive management, the RRWP will be adapted, as needed, to address emerging issues and to incorporate new science or methods as they become available.

2.0 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR PLAN DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Who is responsible for the development of watershed plans?

- Municipalities, often in partnership with conservation authorities, are responsible for watershed planning.

- TRCA undertakes the development of watershed plans in collaboration with our partner municipalities because of our technical expertise, data, and knowledge of the watershed, and our experience in watershed planning.
- TRCA is developing the watershed plan for the Rouge River in collaboration with the RRWP Steering Committee including Alderville First Nation, Chippewas of Rama First Nation, Hiawatha First Nation, Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, City of Markham, City of Pickering, City of Richmond Hill, City of Toronto, Region of Durham, Region of York, Rouge National Urban Park, Town of Aurora and Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville.
- Input from additional First Nations and Indigenous communities, and from watershed stakeholders, residents, and the public, has/will be obtained throughout the watershed planning process and will be incorporated into the final watershed plan, as appropriate.

Who is responsible for implementation of the Rouge River Watershed Plan?

- Our partner municipalities, along with TRCA, will play key roles in the implementation of the RRWP. Some of the Plan's management actions also identify specific stakeholders that will be responsible for implementing some of the management actions.
- Collaborative and comprehensive implementation, tracking, and reporting of all aspects of the watershed plan by TRCA and our partners will be essential to fully realize the vision for the watershed, demonstrate accountability and transparency, improve watershed health, and ensure safe and sustainable waterways, ecosystems, and human communities.
- An Implementation Steering Committee consisting of TRCA, participating First Nations, and our partner municipalities will be established upon final approval of the RRWP to guide and support implementation and will be facilitated by TRCA. The Implementation Steering Committee will work together to create a detailed implementation, tracking, and reporting plan to ensure commitment to and accountability for implementation on the part of TRCA, our partner municipalities, and other stakeholders.

Will the Rouge River Watershed Plan decide on future land use?

- Watershed plans **do not** make land use decisions. They are not land use plans, nor do they constitute a land use planning decision.
- The data, scientific analysis, modelling, scenario analysis, and management actions generated through a watershed planning process can be used by municipalities as a systems-based integrated information source.
- The RRWP is intended to inform land use and infrastructure planning and other municipal (and TRCA) initiatives including ecosystem restoration and management, land management/acquisition, best practices

for rural land uses, low impact development and green infrastructure implementation, and climate adaptation planning.

3.0 WATER RESOURCES AND NATURAL HERITAGE SYSTEMS

What is the Water Resource System and why is it important?

- The Water Resource System is a system of groundwater and surface water features, areas, and their hydrological functions within the watershed that provide the water needed to sustain healthy aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and human water consumption.

What is the Natural Heritage System and why is it important?

- The Natural Heritage System is a network of all the natural heritage features and areas (i.e., wetlands, forests, meadows, etc.), and linkages that provide habitat, connectivity, and support natural processes, which are necessary to maintain biodiversity as well as ecosystem functions and services.

4.0 ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

What is the public engagement process for the Rouge River Watershed Plan?

- The development of the RRWP is a highly collaborative process. Effective and meaningful engagement leads to improved watershed planning outcomes. It helps facilitate community buy-in and strengthens support from First Nations and Indigenous communities as well as from key watershed stakeholders, residents, and the public. This helps to garner broader support from policy makers and to facilitate effective implementation by relevant partners.
- Since the development of watershed plans is a multi-year, collaborative initiative, regular engagement is vital to the successful development and eventual implementation of a watershed plan.
- The objectives for engagement throughout this watershed planning process are:
 - To build meaningful relationships with First Nations and Indigenous communities to ensure inclusion of their voices, perspectives and priorities as part of the watershed planning process. This could include, for example, collaborating with First Nations and Indigenous communities to incorporate Indigenous Traditional Knowledge Systems and local knowledge, in addition to providing opportunities for the involvement of First Nations and Indigenous communities as part of the implementation of the watershed plan.
 - To strengthen partnerships with municipalities, key watershed stakeholders, residents, and the public within the watershed and to identify opportunities for collaboration, coordination, and strategic resource-sharing to improve watershed health.

- To build community awareness on the importance of healthy watersheds and identify opportunities for improved community involvement in the development and implementation of the RRWP.
- To achieve broad based input/support/endorsement of watershed plan goals, objectives, and management actions to enable effective implementation.
- There are key intervals when TRCA will seek input on the RRWP. Diverse methods of receiving feedback will be used to make it easier for different groups to provide their input. The following is a brief summary of the key engagement activities to date:
 - The [webpage](#) provides ongoing project updates.
 - Progress updates and engagement notifications are circulated to First Nations and Indigenous communities as well as to the subscribers/stakeholders lists, TRCA's Board of Directors, Regional Watershed Alliance members, and local and regional municipal councillors, and are posted to TRCA's social media channels and in TRCA's newsletters and through various TRCA teams.
 - In Fall 2025, we will release an online engagement survey and host public online webinars to launch and provide information on the development of the new RRWP and to obtain input regarding the important watershed themes and words to help guide the development of the vision statement for the watershed, the key issues the watershed is facing, and climate or weather-related changes or impacts experienced or observed in the watershed.

5.0 GENERAL PLANNING PROCESS

What is an Official Plan

- An Official Plan describes a municipality's policies on how land should be used. An Official Plan deals mainly with issues such as:
 - where new housing, industry, offices, and shops will be located
 - what services like roads, watermains, sewers, parks, and schools will be needed
 - when, and in what order, parts of your community will grow
 - community improvement initiatives ([Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2021](#))

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