

TECHNICAL BRIEFING

Improving Ontario's Conservation Authority System



**PROTECT
ONTARIO**

Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks

March 10, 2026

Ontario 

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1. Overview: Ontario's conservation authority system

The Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) administers the *Conservation Authorities Act* (CAA) and is responsible for overseeing Ontario's 36 existing conservation authorities (CAs).

CAs play a vital role in **watershed management** and protecting communities from **natural hazards** like floods. They also deliver programs and services that further the conservation, restoration, and management of natural resources.

CAs issue **permits** to builders, municipalities, and property owners for development activities such as housing developments and installation of sewage systems in areas affected by risks of natural hazards such as floodplains, shorelines, river and stream valleys, and wetlands. Permitting helps to ensure that development does not happen in unsafe areas and that it does not worsen the impacts of flooding or erosion in surrounding areas.

What is a watershed?

A watershed is an area of land that drains all the streams and rainfall into a common outlet, such as a lake, bay or river.

2. The need for action

The Ontario government is taking action to protect Ontario's economy, workers, and communities by making the province the best place in the G7 to invest, create jobs, and do business. To achieve this, the government is making investments to build local infrastructure and taking action to bring more consistency and transparency to the cost and timelines of building homes.

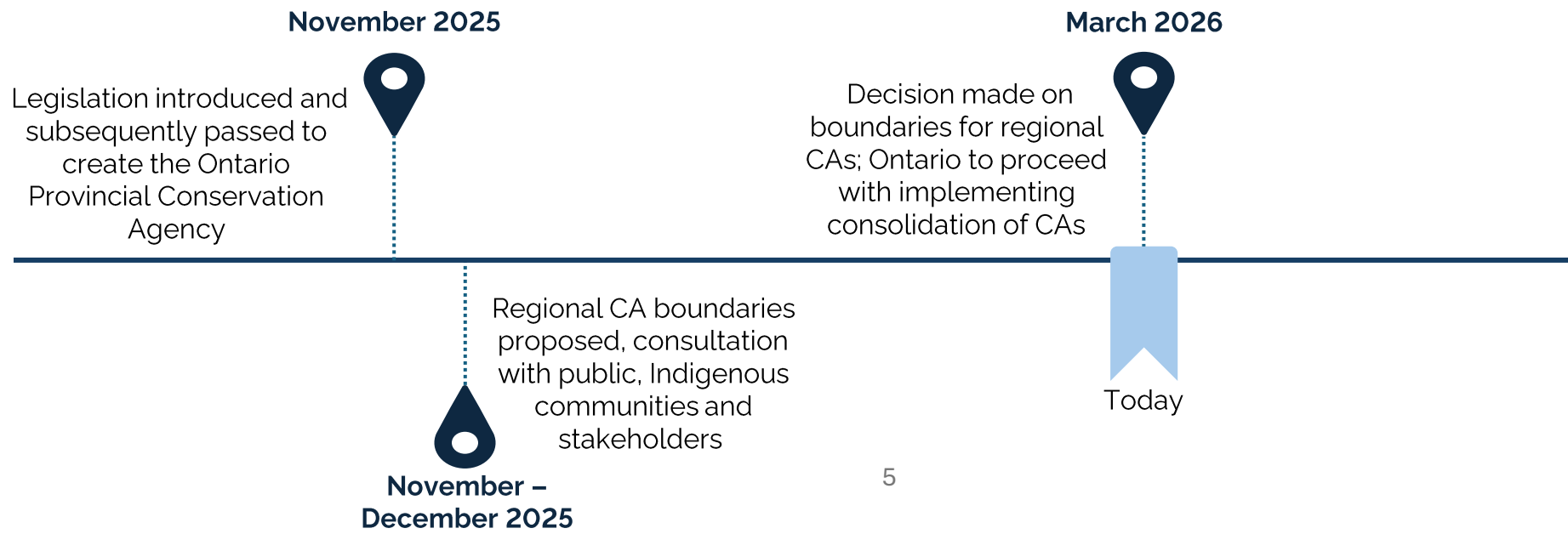
CAs are independent, local public sector organizations with significant variation in capacity, governance, transparency, and reliance on municipal funding. Over time, this has created a fragmented system with inconsistent standards and timelines.

Key challenges under the current framework that this proposal seeks to address include:

- **A patchwork of standards, service delivery:** Each CA has different policies, customer service standards, fees, processes and staffing, and technical capacity leading to unpredictable and inconsistent turnaround times for approvals across all CAs. This can result in uncertainty and delays for builders, landowners, and farmers seeking permits.
- **Outdated and fragmented data systems:** Lack of resources has led to discrepancies in the tools and technology that CAs use, leading to varying types and quality of technology and data management. This can compromise effective provincewide flood risk management and evidence-based decision making.
- **Administrative duplication:** Under the current framework, municipalities are forced to fund duplicate corporate functions (e.g., procurement, communications), diverting costs away from front-line conservation and service delivery.
- **Need for more accountability and transparency:** Lack of transparent asset management and inconsistent performance monitoring and reporting.

2. Actions to date

- Ontario is making progress on its commitment to enhance the effectiveness of conservation authorities, creating more consistency and modern standards and ensuring CAs remain strong, effective and ready to meet today's challenges. Since announcing our plan in fall 2025, we have passed legislation to create the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency (OPCA) to provide centralized leadership and oversight of regional CAs, including coordinating a smooth and organized consolidation and key initiatives to improve the CA system, and we consulted extensively on the proposed regional CA boundaries.
- Consultations included virtual sessions with CAs, municipalities, stakeholders, and Indigenous communities, and regional workshops with CA and municipal leadership led by the Chief Conservation Executive and the Minister. More than 500 people participated, and 14,000+ comments were submitted on the proposed boundaries. We listened and used this feedback to strengthen the plan.
- The government is now moving forward with a framework for the regional consolidation of Ontario's 36 CAs into 9 optimized regional CAs that would deliver more consistent, more efficient, and more cost-effective outcomes for the communities that they serve. In the coming weeks, the government plans to introduce amendments to the CAA that would set out and enable the framework for consolidation of Ontario's CAs.



3. Why consolidation

Under the current system, more than half of all municipalities in areas served by CAs fall within the jurisdiction of two or more CAs, resulting in unnecessary duplication that diverts resources from front line conservation work and service delivery. Individual CAs have significant disparities in size and resources, with some lacking access to the latest tools and technology that support flood risk management and evidence-based decision making.

Consolidation would enable more consistent service delivery and more efficient resource and information sharing, making CAs more responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

What these changes would mean:

- More resources for front-line services
- Improved flood management and erosion prevention
- Strong environmental protections maintained
- Faster permit approvals
- Modern service delivery
- Consistent standards and use of modern technology

What's not changing:

- Where CAs operate (areas currently served by CAs will continue to be served by CAs)
- The programs and services CAs provide, including the responsibility for source water protection, natural hazard and watershed management
- CA management of their lands and trails, providing access to green spaces, recreation and education programs
- Where and how CAs receive funding
- CA relationships with municipalities, developers, landowners
- Each CA being an independent, municipally-governed organization

4. Guiding principles

- The following principles informed the actions the province is taking to improve CAs, in addition to feedback heard during consultation:
 - **Retain local influence** – ensure local knowledge, expertise and interests inform the watershed management and conservation work of CAs
 - **Maintain CA watershed-based jurisdictions** – align with natural hydrological boundaries to support flood/water management. Align with drinking water source protection regions
 - **Reduce administrative overlap and duplication** – streamline requirements and processes for municipalities and conservation authorities
 - **Strengthen CA capacity** – improve and standardize the level of expertise and resources across CAs. Seek to balance the needs and interests of urban, rural, northern and southern watersheds
 - **Continuity of services** – minimize disruptions to CA operations and staffing, ensuring uninterrupted delivery of key programs such as permits, watershed management and trails and recreation for public use
 - **Improve customer service** – enhance consistency and clarity in process and timelines

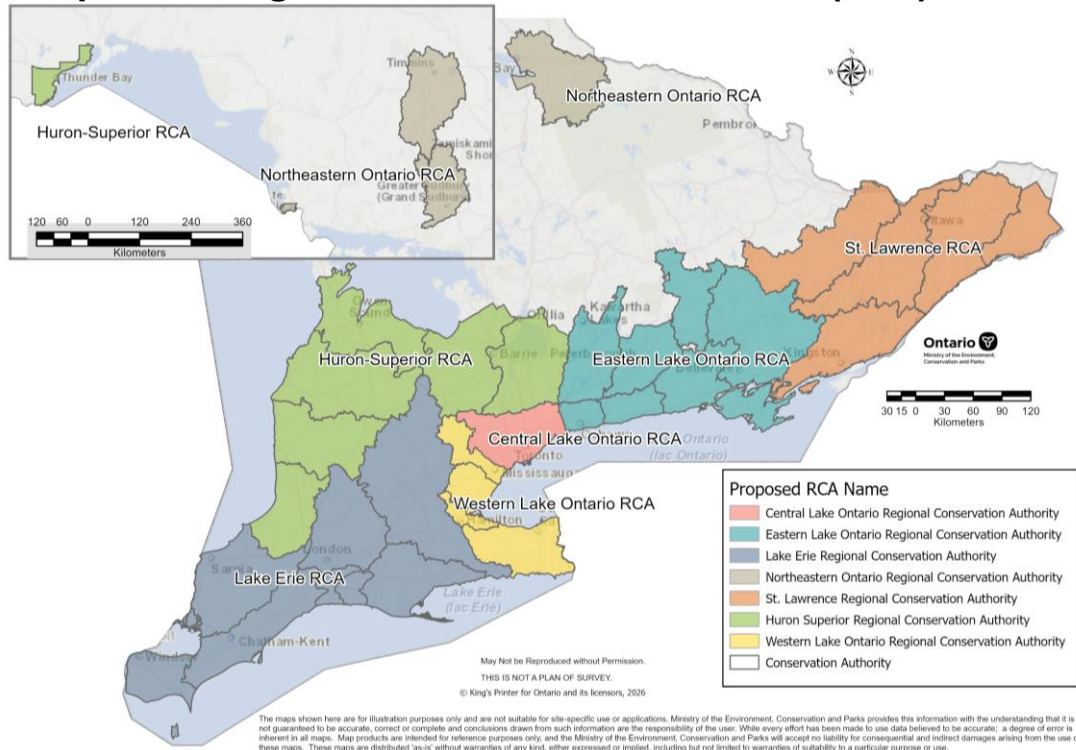
5. Our plan: Improving Ontario's CA system

- The government plans to introduce amendments to the *Conservation Authorities Act* (CAA) that would set out the consolidation of Ontario's CAs in accordance with the framework described in this presentation.
- The plan is for CA consolidation to take effect early 2027, allowing for transition planning to occur throughout 2026. Over time, OPCA will further transform Ontario's CA system, including by developing a single digital permitting platform to provide a faster, more predictable approvals process and improved customer service
- To support regional CAs throughout the transition, the province is providing annual funding to OPCA in the amount of \$3 million, beginning in 2026. This funding will be used by OPCA to support regional CAs as needed during transition. Post-transition, this annual funding will support OPCA to help regional CAs achieve improvements and program standards set by OPCA.

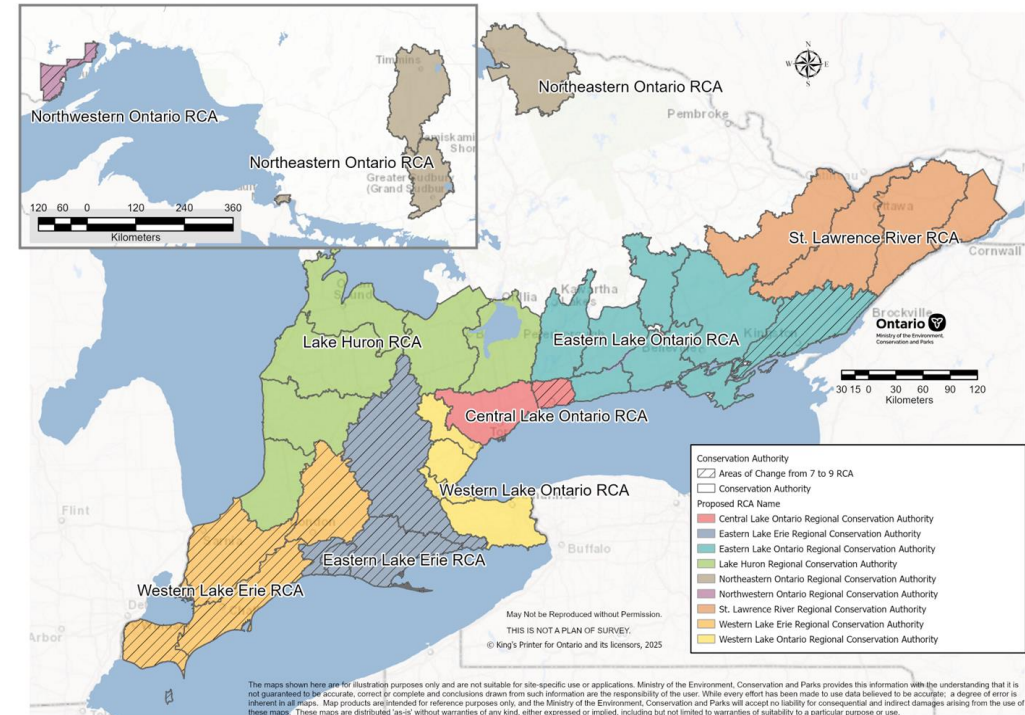
6. Regional CA boundaries

- The regional CA boundaries have been adjusted and refined (from 7 to 9). The feedback received during consultation directly informed the adjustments made to the final regional CA boundaries, which have been optimized to:
 - Accommodate areas with distinct geographies and development contexts
 - Balance differing priorities across rural, urban and northern areas
 - Better align with watersheds and with source protection regions

Proposed 7 Regional Conservation Authorities (RCA)



Final Optimized 9 Regional Conservation Authorities (RCA)



6. Regional CA boundaries: current corresponding CAs

Proposed Regional CAs	List of predecessor (i.e., existing) CAs being consolidated	
Central Lake Ontario Regional Conservation Authority	Central Lake Ontario CA	Toronto and Region CA
Eastern Lake Erie Regional Conservation Authority	- Catfish Creek CA - Grand River CA	- Kettle Creek CA - Long Point Region CA
Eastern Lake Ontario Regional Conservation Authority	- Cataraqui Region CA - Crowe Valley CA - Ganaraska Region CA - Kawartha Region CA	- Lower Trent RegionCA - Otonabee Region CA - Quinte Region CA
Lake Huron Regional Conservation Authority	- Ausable Bayfield CA - Grey Sauble CA - Lake Simcoe Region CA	- Maitland Valley CA - Nottawasaga Valley CA - Saugeen Valley CA
Northeastern Ontario Regional Conservation Authority	- Mattagami Region CA - Nickel District CA	- North Bay Mattawa CA - Sault Ste. Marie Region CA
Northwestern Ontario Regional Conservation Authority	Lakehead Region CA	
St. Lawrence River Regional Conservation Authority	- Mississippi Valley CA - Raisin Region CA	- Rideau Valley CA - South Nation River CA
Western Lake Erie Regional Conservation Authority	- Essex Region CA - Lower Thames Valley CA	- St. Clair Region CA - Upper Thames River CA
Western Lake Ontario Regional Conservation Authority	- Credit Valley CA - Halton Region CA	- Hamilton Region CA - Niagara Peninsula CA

7. Regional CA Governance

- Consistent with previous commitments and feedback heard, regional CAs will continue to be municipally governed organizations.
- Under our plan, participating municipalities that are responsible for appointing members (i.e. “the board”) and for paying CA levies would be at the upper-tier (i.e., regional municipalities and counties) and single-tier levels (e.g. cities, towns etc.) This change would mean that lower-tier municipalities (e.g. towns and townships, etc.) within a county would no longer be participating municipalities, as is currently the case where there is a county as the upper-tier municipality.
- Rules for how members are to be selected would be set out in regulation based on each participating municipality's percentage of the population in the regional CA's jurisdiction . Small municipalities are ensured representation by requiring that each participating municipality appoint at least one member. Rules for the number of members may also include:
 - Capping the total number of members on a CA board.
 - Limiting any one municipality's number of members (e.g., to 5) to ensure balanced representation.
- Following the municipal elections on October 26, 2026, newly-elected upper tier municipal councils would select the first members (i.e., “board”) for the new regional CAs prior to the targeted amalgamation date.

7. Regional CA Governance: CAs and municipalities

Regional consolidation of CAs would result in a reduction in the number of municipalities that belong to multiple CAs. This would empower Ontario's CAs in delivering more consistent, more efficient, and more cost-effective outcomes for the communities they serve.

	Current State Regions, single-tier, lower-tier	Consolidated Regions, counties, single-tier	% Change
Number of CAs	36	9	75.0%
Municipalities part of 1 CA	126	57	54.8%
Municipalities part of ≥ 2 CAs	60	16	73.3%
Municipalities part of ≥ 3 CAs	19	4	78.9%
Municipalities part of ≥ 4 CAs	3	1	66.7%
Municipalities part of ≥ 5 CAs	2	0	100%

- Note: Municipalities and associated numbers represent 'participating municipalities' for CAs both in the current state and once consolidated. There is no change in the total number of municipalities that are within a CA's jurisdiction.

7. Regional CA Governance: Watershed Councils

Watershed Councils

- In response to feedback that emphasized the need for regional CAs to continue to rely on the deep local expertise, knowledge, and relationships built, the province plans to mandate that regional CAs create one or more local Watershed Councils to ensure watershed management continues to be informed by local knowledge and input.
- Watershed Councils would assist the CA in identifying local priorities for programs and services to ensure that local interests are considered as part the board's decision-making process.
- Specific requirements for membership composition of Watershed Councils may be set out in regulation (e.g., Indigenous representatives to enable considering Indigenous knowledge, as well as agriculture and development representation to consider other local watershed perspectives),

8. Transition process

Statutory Amalgamation

- With the proposed statutory amalgamation that would create the regional CAs, on the transition date, the former CAs would be amalgamated creating the regional CA ,and legal continuation is provided for:
 - All assets and liabilities of the predecessor CAs
 - All rights and obligations of the predecessor CAs
 - All partnerships, agreements and funding obligations of the predecessor CAs
 - Employees of the predecessor CAs (all rights, duties and liabilities)
 - Permit applications made before the transition date
 - Any hearings underway or hearing requests
- In other words, after the consolidation date, the new Regional CAs would replace the former CAs as legal entities. This approach is intended to avoid disruptions to existing partnerships and agreements with municipalities, Indigenous communities, or others.
- The amalgamation of the predecessor CAs in the new regional CAs would be governed by the *Public Sector Labour Relations Transition Act*, which sets out a clear, structured and neutral framework for dealing with labour relations issues following restructuring of public sector organizations (e.g. the need to rationalize bargaining units).



8. Transition process

To ensure service continuity and limit disruptions, and as informed by consultation feedback, under our plan OPCA will coordinate consolidation by establishing a transition committee and providing resources, tools and guidance to support transition efforts for each regional CA being consolidated.

Transition committees

- Transition committees for each regional CA would prepare for the amalgamation of the predecessor CAs into the new regional CA. Each predecessor CA will appoint one municipally elected member and its CAO or GM (or an alternate if they are not available) to the Transition Committee.
- OPCA will appoint a Project Executive to chair each Transition Committee and who would become the inaugural Chief Administrative Officer of the regional CA for up to 24 months.
- Committees would be dissolved following regional consolidation.

Transition plans

- With guidance from OPCA—including a transition playbook with templates and best practices—Transition Committees would develop and implement transition plans to guide each new regional CA through an orderly, step-by-step integration of its predecessor CAs across key functions such as HR, finance, assets, and IT.

8. Transition process

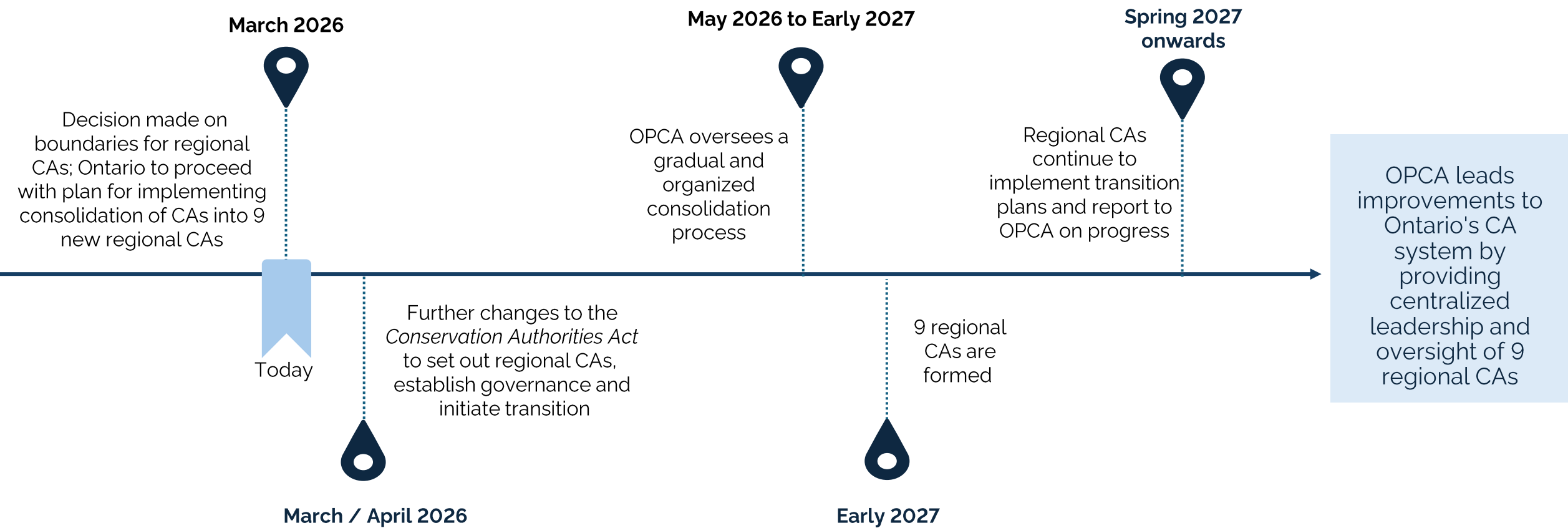
Temporary guardrails

- Our plan includes that temporary guardrails would be applied to extraordinary financial, asset, or employment decisions to mitigate risk and ensure a stable transition to the new regional structure and mitigate risk
- The Minister would be enabled to issue temporary directions to support an orderly CA consolidation. This is not intended to disrupt regular CA business and operations.
- For example, this power could be used to temporarily halt activities such as major land dispositions, significant procurements or material changes to management or organizational structures without review and authorization by the Agency or the Transition Committee.

2027 CA Budgets

- The minister would also be able to issue directions to manage the 2027 budget process for the 36 predecessor CAs, which could be used to provide clarity around timelines (e.g., direct that CA budgeting be completed by December 31, 2026 and levies be issued to the current participating municipalities).

8. Transition process: Timeline



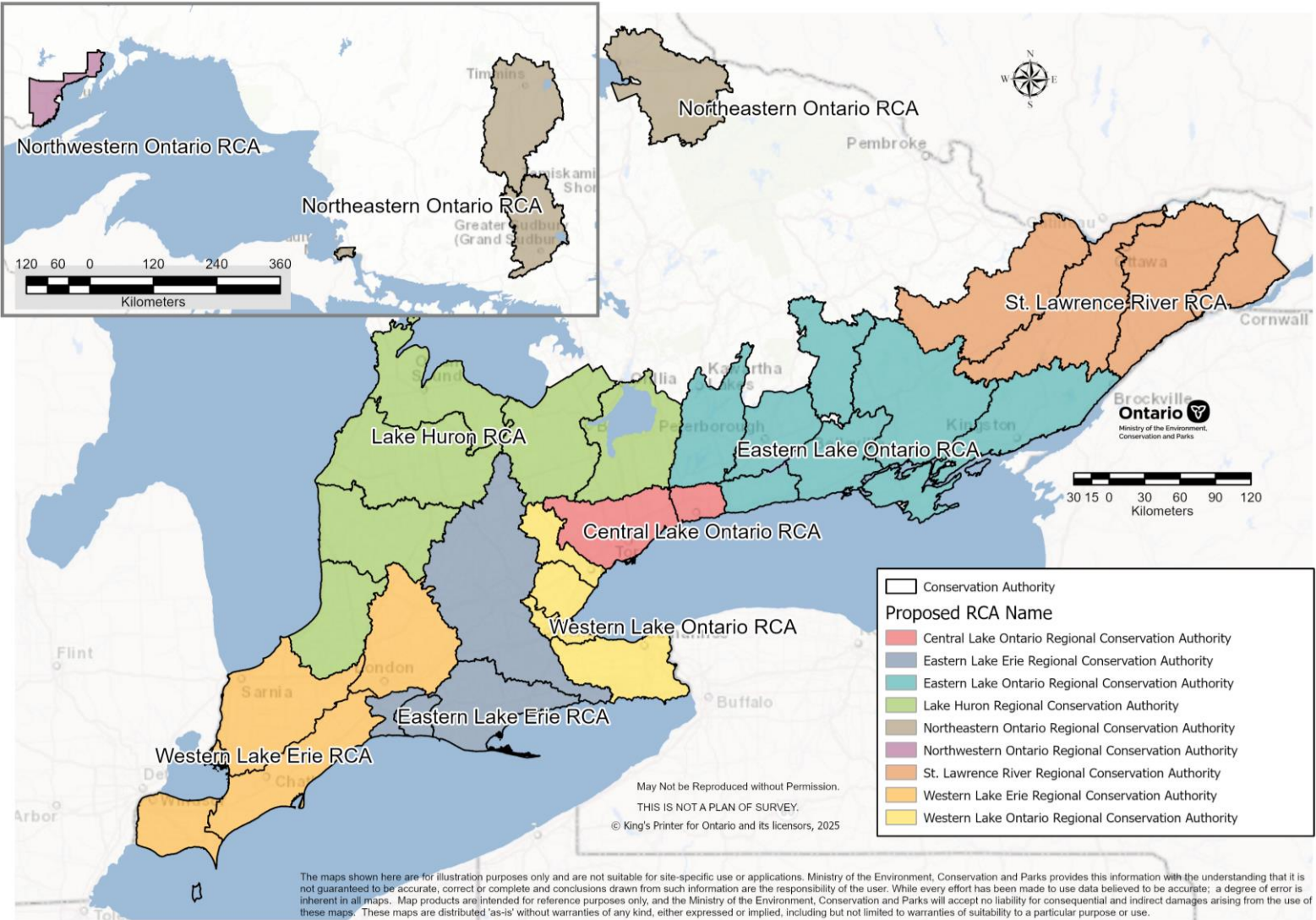
9. Next Steps

- In the coming weeks and months, the provincial government plans to:
 - Propose further amendments to the *Conservation Authorities Act* (CAA) that, if passed, sets out the provincially led amalgamation of the 36 existing conservation authorities to create 9 regional CAs, including transitional governance and activities to be coordinated by the OPCA .
 - Invite you to technical briefings to provide further information on the next steps in the planned transition process.
 - Engage with CAs, municipalities, Indigenous communities and other interested partners to provide updates about the government's plans and consolidation.
 - Support the OPCA to coordinate transition planning for consolidation to take effect early 2027, with minimal disruptions/interruptions to CAs' services and staffing.
- The Office of the Chief Conservation Executive would lead CA transition activities as OPCA becomes fully operational. For questions regarding the plans for consolidation, please contact CCEO@ontario.ca.
- If you have questions about the planned legislative amendments and day-to-day CA business, please reach out to MECP staff via ca.office@ontario.ca.

10. Summary

- Ontario's current CA system is fragmented, with inconsistent standards and timelines across 36 individual CAs that can slow down development approvals and risks hampering CAs' abilities to protect their communities from floods and other natural hazards.
- Since announcing our plan in fall 2025, we have consulted extensively. We listened and used this feedback to strengthen our plan, and we are now ready to move forward with plans to introduce amendments to the CAA that would set out and enable the consolidation of Ontario's 36 CAs to create 9 consolidation of Ontario's 36 CAs to create 9 new regional CAs, targeted to take effect in early 2027.
- With centralized leadership and independent oversight of CAs by the new Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, Ontario's CA system will provide streamlined, consistent, and improved service delivery without any reduction in environmental standards. These changes will better position CAs to support needed housing and infrastructure projects more efficiently while continuing to protect communities from flooding and other natural hazards, fulfilling provincially mandated programs such as drinking water source protection under the *Clean Water Act*, and managing CA-owned lands and recreational trails so that Ontarians have access to local natural areas and outdoor activities.

Appendix: Boundaries for Ontario's 9 new regional CAs*



*Plan is for this to take effect in early 2027, subject to amendments being proposed to the *Conservation Authorities Act*

Appendix: Ontario's Current 36 CAs

