

**Report to
Rapport au:**

**Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee
Comité de l'agriculture et des affaires rurales
6 May 2021 / 6 mai 2021**

**and Council
et au Conseil
12 May 2021 / 12 mai 2021**

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**Submitted by
Soumis par:
Don Herweyer,
Director / Directeur**

**Economic Development Services / Service du développement économique,
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Ward: CITY WIDE / À L'ÉCHELLE DE LA VILLE File Number: ACS2021-PIE-EDP-0013

SUBJECT: Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program 2016-2020 Review and Renewal

**OBJET: Examen et renouvellement du Programme d'assainissement de l'eau
en milieu rural d'Ottawa 2016-2020**

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee recommend that Council:

- 1. Receive the Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program 2016-2020 Review and Renewal (Document 1); and**

2. **Approve the 2021-2025 Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program as outlined in this report and as described in Document 1.**

RECOMMANDATIONS DU RAPPORT

Que le Comité de l'agriculture et des affaires rurales recommande au Conseil ce qui suit :

1. **Prendre connaissance de l'examen et du renouvellement du Programme d'assainissement de l'eau en milieu rural d'Ottawa 2016-2020 (Document 1); et**
2. **Approuver le Programme d'assainissement de l'eau en milieu rural d'Ottawa 2021-2025, comme l'explique ce rapport et comme le précise le document 1.**

BACKGROUND

The Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program ([ORCWP](#)) provides cost-share grants to farmers City-wide and all rural landowners for projects that protect surface and groundwater quality. The ORCWP offers grants of up to \$15,000 for 18 project types that include agricultural best management practices, erosion control, and well decommissioning. The program is delivered in partnership with the South Nation, Rideau Valley, and Mississippi Valley Conservation Authorities.

Since its inception in 2000, the Program has supported over 1,300 projects through \$2.7 million in grants. Landowners contributed an additional \$10.1 million towards those projects at an average rate of \$3.86 for every dollar granted by the City.

The current [Program](#) was renewed in 2015 for five years with a budget of \$200,000 per year, and it is funded by the City through a special levy to South Nation Conservation. This report presents the key findings of the Program Review for the last five years (2016-2020) and proposes recommendations for a renewed Program for 2021-2025. Further details are provided in Documents 1 and 2.

DISCUSSION

A Program Review was undertaken to evaluate the performance of the Program in terms of the following:

- Goals and objectives;
- Program design;
- Program delivery, including administration, promotion, and budget; and

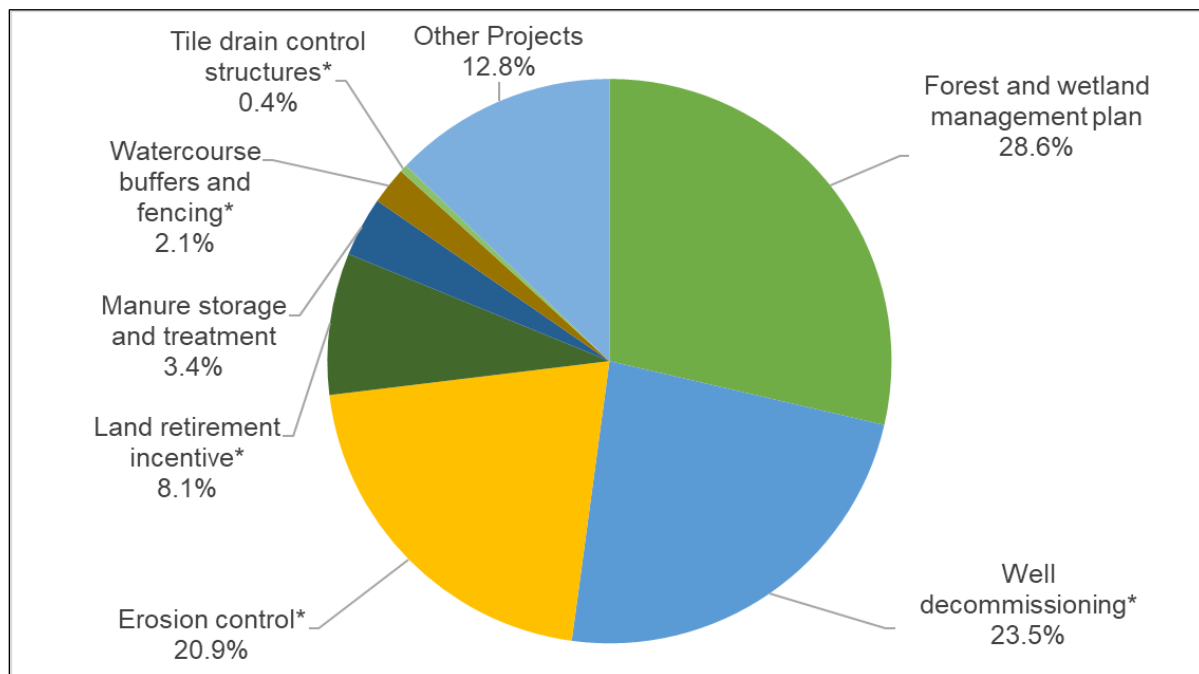
- Program governance, monitoring, and reporting.

The Review also documents the Program outcomes from 2016-2020 and summarizes overall trends from similar clean water programs across the Province of Ontario.

Program Outcomes

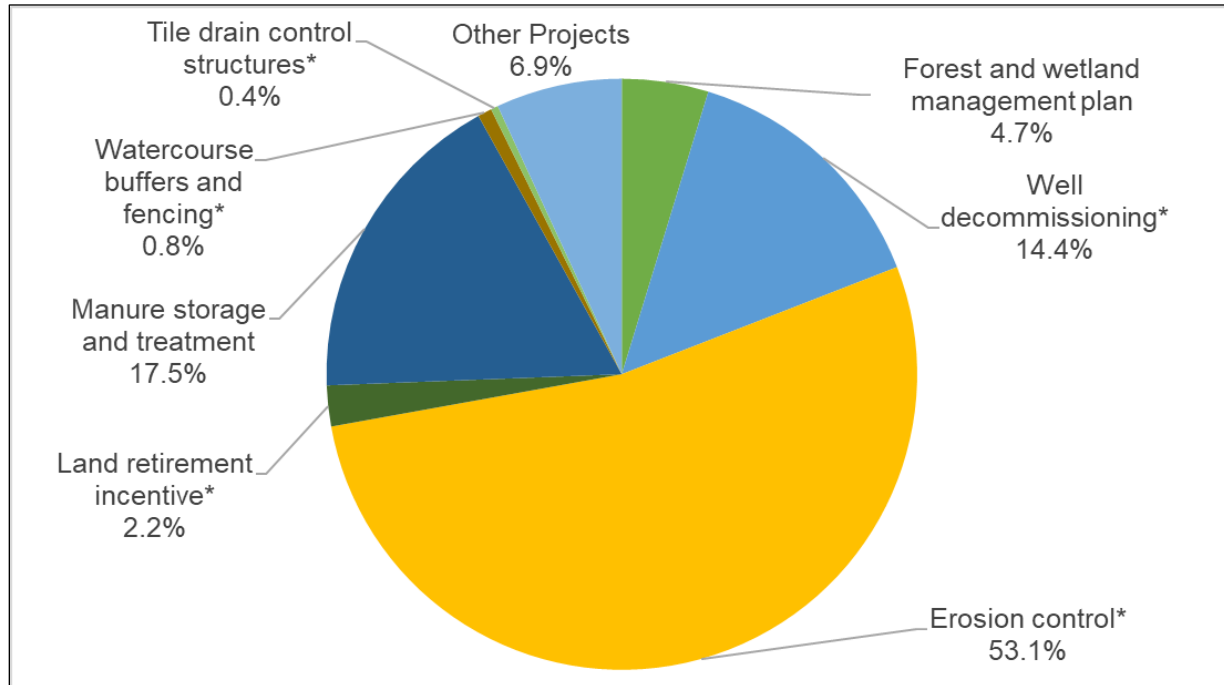
Since 2016, the Program has supported 234 projects at a total grant value of \$627,425 with an additional investment by landowners of \$1.4 million. Forest management plans, well decommissioning, erosion control, and land retirement incentives represented the most common project types (Figure 1). Most grant funding (85%) was allocated to erosion control, manure storage and treatment, and well decommissioning (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Project types from 2016-2020



*Identified as a high priority project.

Figure 2: Grant allocations from 2016-2020



*Identified as a high priority project.

Projects have been undertaken across the City with most farm-based projects occurring on fertile agricultural lands. Forest management plans have mainly been completed in the western area of the City, and most erosion control projects have occurred along the Rideau River and the Ottawa River near Constance Bay.

Other Clean Water Programs

Overall, there is a high similarity between the ORCWP and many of the 28 clean water programs found across Ontario in terms of projects offered and available funding. Certain project types that are frequently offered by other programs, but not the ORCWP, include well upgrading, replacement, and protection of natural and/or wetland habitat creation and restoration. Funding for well upgrades was discontinued by the ORCWP in 2011 to prioritize water quality protection for the greatest public benefit.

Goals and Objectives

Protecting Ottawa's streams, rivers, wetlands, and groundwater by providing cost-share grants to landowners remains a relevant program goal. Most stakeholders agree that the existing suite of projects is well-aligned with this goal. There is recognition among stakeholders of the importance to strive for continuous improvement to further advance the goal and objectives. For example, the protection of wetlands can be directly linked to only two project types at present.

Program Design

An aim of the 2016-2020 Program was to promote priority projects that directly improve water quality and to encourage greater uptake by landowners. Several priority project types remained very popular, including well decommissioning, erosion control, and fragile land retirement (53 per cent of total projects, Figure 1). Other priority projects saw little to no uptake over the past five years, including tile drain control structures, watercourse buffers, and watercourse fencing.

The Review examined ways to enhance the existing suite of project types through discussions with stakeholders, surveys of grant recipients, and program trends across Ontario. Ideas were brought forward to improve the eligibility criteria and/or cost-share amounts for cover crops, septic repairs/replacements, erosion control, and tile drain control structures. Expanding the Program to include broader environmental stewardship goals was considered, and suggestions for new project types included wetland creation and restoration, climate change mitigation, and biodiversity/pollinators.

Administration

The ORCWP is administered by the South Nation, Rideau Valley, and Mississippi Valley Conservation Authorities with the support of Review Committees comprised of local farmers and landowners. Using a streamlined delivery approach, projects are also identified and administered through partnerships with Green Acres (the City's rural tree planting program) and the Conservation Authorities' shoreline naturalization programs.

Feedback from a survey of past participants was very positive, with 84 per cent of respondents expressing satisfaction with the Program's administration and 76 per cent of respondents indicating that their application was approved in a timely manner. Stakeholders proposed several ideas to enhance the administration and delivery of the Program, including implementing staff level approvals and site visits for specific project types and updating the application form and guidance document.

Promotion

The Program is promoted using a range of methods including print, social media, attendance at fairs and events, targeted activities, and presentations. Program staff participated in 49 rural fairs and events, including open houses held in response to historic flooding on the Ottawa River in 2017 and 2019. Targeted promotional activities included a grass buffer demonstration site and two videos showcasing a farmer's experience with controlled tile drainage to highlight priority projects with limited uptake.

Despite these on-going efforts with promotion and outreach, 80 per cent of survey respondents felt that the ORCWP is not effectively promoted. Stakeholders and past

participants made suggestions to maintain the Program's effectiveness and to encourage priority projects with lower uptake, including using targeted social media, connecting with local contractors/suppliers, and supporting demonstration projects. Additional ideas for improving the promotion of the Program are highlighted in Document 1.

Budget

Total ORCWP funding for 2016 to 2020 was \$1,000,000, including \$304,727 in surplus funds from the 2011-2015 program and an annual special levy to South Nation Conservation ranging from \$95,273 to \$200,000.

Total ORCWP expenses from 2016-2020 were \$846,430, including grants and program delivery expenses. Program delivery expenses were 26 per cent of total expenditures. The remaining balance of \$153,570 was encumbered and will be carried forward to 2021 for projects approved in previous years that have not yet been completed.

Demand for funding under the ORCWP has increased since the last Review in 2015, and the Program is now consistently oversubscribed with an annual waiting list.

Governance

The ORCWP is guided by an external Program Committee composed of representatives of agricultural and environmental organizations, provincial agencies, local Conservation Authorities, and community members. The Program Committee is responsible for making a recommendation on overall program delivery, appointing representatives to Review Committees, and hearing appeals.

Overall, this governance structure works well, as the Program benefits from the expertise of the Program Committee members. An ongoing challenge, also identified during the last Review, is related to inconsistent participation and vacancies from members. Further information and suggestions for addressing this challenge are available in Document 1.

Monitoring and Reporting

The current framework for monitoring and evaluating the Program is comprehensive and uses a variety of metrics. Project statistics are tracked by the Program database, and site representatives visit a select number of completed projects for follow up.

The Program reports annually to the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee. Program Reviews are undertaken on a five-year cycle to examine strengths and challenges, ensure the Program remains relevant, and recommend ways to adapt when necessary.

Key Program Changes for 2021-2025

The following are key program changes recommended as a result of the Program Review. The complete list and details are contained in Document 1.

Eligible Projects

- Introduce wetland habitat restoration as a new eligible project type.
- Modify the criteria for the following project types:
 - Cover crops (revise criteria);
 - Septic system repairs/replacement (clarify criteria); and
 - Erosion control (revise criteria, prioritize access to funding).
- Modify the grant structure for the following project types:
 - Tile drain control structure (increase cost share); and
 - Chemical/fuel storage, nutrient management plan/precision farming, and septic system repair/replacement (increase grant amounts).

Program Administration

- Implement staff level approvals and reinstate site visits for forest management plans, septic system repair/replacement, and well decommissioning.
- Update application form to accept online submissions and electronic signatures.
- Explore the feasibility of making the Healthy Home Guide available online.

Promotion and Outreach

- Connect with local contractors and suppliers to encourage Program referrals for priority projects with lower uptake.
- Use social media more effectively for targeted promotion.
- Use City Stream Watch, and related studies, to identify and target potential projects.

Funding

- Continue to fund the Program at \$200,000 per year for 2021-2025 through a special levy to South Nation Conservation.

Program Committee

- Offer Program Committee membership to:
 - Relevant agricultural organizations not currently involved; and
 - Interested citizens and/or Review Committee members.
- Encourage a stakeholder to fill the role of Program Committee Chair.

Monitoring and Reporting

- Explore the feasibility of moving the program database to an online platform.
- Provide a simple online survey immediately following grant payment.

RURAL IMPLICATIONS

The ORCWP supports farmers and other rural landowners to undertake projects on their land that protect water quality. Since 2000, the Program has supported more than 1,300 projects with more than \$2.7 million in grants. The proposed renewed Program continues to support the rural community as well as farmers within the urban boundary.

CONSULTATION

Consultation for this report included:

- Interviews and online surveys for Program stakeholders including Conservation Authorities, provincial ministries, agricultural organizations, environmental organizations, and community members.
- Online surveys for past participants in the Program including successful and unsuccessful grant applicants.

Email notifications were sent directly to all stakeholders and past Program participants to provide an opportunity to take part in an online survey. Committee members were given the option to respond to the survey questions through a verbal interview.

COMMENTS BY THE WARD COUNCILLORS

Not applicable – this is a City-wide report.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no legal impediments to implementing the recommendations of this report.

RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

There are no risk implications.

ASSET MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The recommendations documented in this report are consistent with the City's [Comprehensive Asset Management \(CAM\) Program](#) objectives. The implementation of the Comprehensive Asset Management program enables the City to effectively manage existing and new infrastructure to maximize benefits, reduce risk, and provide safe and reliable levels of service to community users. This is done in a socially, culturally, environmentally, and economically conscious manner.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications associated with this report. The proposed annual special levy of \$200,000 to the South Nation Conservation Authority is consistent with the annual levy for the 2016-2020 program and with their levy request for 2021.

ACCESSIBILITY IMPACTS

Program information available on the City's website complies with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. No other barriers were identified that would impede the participation of people with disabilities or seniors in this Program.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

The ORCWP protects and improves the quality of surface and groundwater by working with rural landowners to implement projects on their property. Projects include agricultural best management practices and environmental stewardship. With 88 per cent of watercourses flowing through private property in the City's rural areas, working with landowners is an effective means of protecting and improving water quality.

The Program contributes to Provincial policy including the *Great Lakes Strategy*, *Nutrient Management Act*, and Climate Change Adaptation Strategy. It supports the City's ability to comply with the 2020 Provincial Policy Statement, and further supports the City's Climate Change Master Plan (2020).

TERM OF COUNCIL PRIORITIES

The ORCWP contributes directly to Council's 2019-2022 Strategic Priorities including:

- **Environmental Stewardship:** Grow and protect a healthy, beautiful, and vibrant city that can adapt to change.

- **Service Excellence Through Innovation:** Deliver quality bilingual services that are innovative and continuously improve to meet the needs of individuals and diverse communities.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Document 1 Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program 2016-2020 Review and Renewal

Document 2 Annexes to the Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program 2016-2020 Review and Renewal

DISPOSITION

Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Department staff will work with South Nation, Rideau Valley, and Mississippi Valley Conservation Authorities to renew the 2021-2025 Program, upon Council's approval of the report.