

Executive Summary

Wetland ecosystems are declining globally, including in Ontario. To preserve certain wetlands from human disturbances, Ontario uses the *Ontario Wetland Evaluation System* (OWES) to evaluate wetlands and determine whether they are ‘provincially significant’. Wetlands that are determined to be ‘provincially significant’ are protected from development by section 2.1 of the *Provincial Policy Statement*. In 2022, the Ontario government introduced updates to *OWES* that change how wetlands are evaluated. This report examined these changes and analyzed their implications for land use planning. The research was guided by two research questions:

1. How will the updates in the fourth edition of the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System impact the results of wetland evaluations?
2. What are the planning implications of the changes made to the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System?

The updates made to *OWES* were analyzed through literature review, policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews conducted with practicing evaluators. Key changes included in the updates were identified, including changes to the approval authority, the removal of wetland complexing, the addition of guidelines for re-evaluations, and the deletion of tests related to species at risk. This research found that the changes to *OWES* are likely to result in less wetlands being protected from development. Based on the findings, this report recommends that planning authorities review their local policies affecting wetlands and assess whether these policies are still suitable.