



To: County Council  
From: Mia Frankl, Forestry Management Officer  
Re: Progress Update on the Forest Master Plan  
Date: November 19<sup>th</sup> 2008

---

## REPORT

### 1) Background

#### Forest Advisory Committee

In 2007 Northumberland County initiated a Forest Master Plan process. A Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) was established representing 20 different Forest stakeholders, bringing together representation from the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, the Forest industry, field naturalists (groups or individuals), conservation authorities, one representative from each organized recreational use group, representation from Alderville First Nations, a County Councilor and elected and community representatives from the Townships of Hamilton and Alnwick-Haldimand. This committee serves as a sounding board for the County and its consultants to test ideas and findings during the development of the Forest Master Plan (FMP). To date they have met 7 times to discuss the FMP process which has included a trail study, legislation affecting the future and expanded use of the Forest and most recently an ecological sensitivities atlas.

#### Forest Master Plan

The Northumberland County Forest is located on the Oak Ridges Moraine, under the Natural Core Area land designation of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. There has been much controversy among the public and the FAC over which recreational trail users should and/or should not be permitted. The County obtained a legal opinion which stated that the spirit and intent of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan is to protect key natural heritage features and that landowners must be able to demonstrate that current uses will not compromise the ecological functions of the Moraine.

Two studies have been undertaken to help with discussions in addressing this issue; a Trail Study and an Ecological Sensitivities Atlas.

#### A) Trail Study

Northumberland County hired the services of the Trent University Trail Studies Unit to identify and provide recommendations on the following 4 issues relating to recreational impacts and trail use:

- 1) Lack of a comprehensive GPS trail map
- 2) Conduct and analyze trail condition measurements
- 3) Survey users of the Forest
- 4) Develop a recommended system of trails and trail standards for the permitted trail uses

The study was presented and discussed with the FAC at three workshops. A draft report, "Trails, Trail users and their Management in the Northumberland County Forest," was released in January 2008 and brought to the public via an Open House and Public Forum. The draft report was to be revised according to the additional public input but some issues remained such as whether or not motorized uses would be permitted and if so where, the state of the Scouts Canada lease and an assessment of the FAC trail user groups' willingness to participate in trail maintenance, standards, signage and patrolling and means of protection for ecological sensitivities in the Forest. A sub committee meeting was held with the trail user groups to assess their willingness to contribute and that issue has mostly been resolved, except for a lower than expected willingness to participate by almost half of the user groups.

## B) Ecological Sensitivities Atlas

The Ecological Sensitivities Atlas was designed to initially be used as a tool to assist in the deliberations of the FAC and the development of the Master Plan. Six guiding principles were put forth in January and continue to guide the FAC in the County's consultation with them, these principles are:

1. Protect and enhance the ecological integrity of the Forest ecosystem first and foremost
2. Will honour and comply with all legal requirements that apply to the NCF and its ecosystems
3. Will only allow uses that do not harm or have adverse effects on the integrity of the Forest ecosystem
4. Trail recommendations will be reviewed and assessed in the context of other uses and activities in the Forest such as Forest production, fire protection and other recreational uses
5. Provide for the enforcement of the eventual policies and programs adopted for the Forest
6. Are vetted through the ongoing involvement of the FAC

The atlas builds layers of ecological characteristics through 4 themes, 1-Soils, Geology and Slopes, 2-Water Resources, 3-Natural Heritage Functions and Features and 4- Existing Land Use. Derivative maps are produced at the end of each theme, bringing together the sensitive characteristics and implications on various recreational use and forest management activities. The Atlas concludes with recommendations, or proposals, about land use classifications based on the derivative maps. This is presented as two management implications maps- Map E: Proposed Recreational Access and Map F: Proposed Land Use Zones.

## **2) Current Study Status:**

The County Forest Master Plan process has been under way for 1.5 years. The Trail Study has been extended to the fall of 2008 to allow time for the atlas to be presented and for a merge of the two studies to occur. The cumulative environmental data contained in the ecological atlas enables us to provide scenarios for permitted and prohibited uses across the County Forest.

The Atlas has been successful in gaining strong consensus among the FAC to “put the Forest first” however controversy still exists over motorized use and recreational disturbance. There is still not 100% agreement on the six guiding principles and on the preliminary conclusions and recommendations in the Atlas. One group in particular, the “Northumberland Trail Riders/Ontario Federation of Trail Riders” (dirt bikes) has consistently voiced strong objections. Also a lack of definition or criteria on “ecological integrity” is being questioned by some FAC members and other consultants.

Below is a table showing the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities of the Forest Master Plan process to date.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Agreement that status quo must change</b></li> <li>• Strong agreement on the 6 principles</li> <li>• Strong agreement to implement per intent of Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan</li> <li>• Reduce the amount of trails</li> <li>• Comprehensive public input, FAC input</li> <li>• Consider triple bottom line (social, economic and environment)</li> <li>• Regard to significance of NCF</li> <li>• Comprehensive collection of ecological information on NCF</li> <li>• Guiding recommendations for implementation</li> <li>• Reference point to monitor from now on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connectivity/linkages for motor routes</li> <li>• Compliance with staying on intended trails</li> <li>• Potential impacts on neighbouring properties</li> <li>• No full consensus</li> <li>• Individual agendas persisting</li> <li>• Designated use areas clash between atlas and trail study</li> <li>• Operations-cost, public/trail group participation?</li> <li>• Some wording in atlas is assumptive</li> <li>• Candidate ANSI status versus passed</li> <li>• Accuracy of data in atlas being questioned by some</li> <li>• Arguments to use “engineered standards” for trails in proposed “no go” areas</li> <li>• To be a member or not to be?</li> <li>• Needs to specify off road trucks</li> <li>• Hunting still needs to be addressed</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ontario Federation of ATV’S, shared motorized trails models in Quebec</li> <li>• Land use agreements with trail groups</li> <li>• Managing in harmony with some neighbouring properties</li> <li>• Ontario Trails Strategy, Ontario Trails Council</li> <li>• Township road allowance lease</li> <li>• Field checking some of the data in atlas</li> <li>• Health for Life promotions (active living, trails branding across County)</li> <li>• Cobourg Creek Watershed Plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Polarization between motorized and non motorized users</li> <li>• Definitions of ecological integrity and impact, how to quantify?</li> <li>• Challenging to document environmental degradation (e.g. bird decline or impact on breeding, reduced plant diversity)</li> <li>• Mixing motorized users among non motorized users</li> <li>• Non County residents and population growth in GTA looking for recreational opportunities</li> <li>• Increase in ATV sales</li> <li>• Potential litigations (Highway Traffic Act, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, Species at Risk Act)</li> </ul>

### **3) Interim Actions**

Over the past year, while the studies have been progressing, the County has had to make certain decisions.

- A) Scouts Canada and the Cobourg Scout Reserve: This summer the County and Scouts Canada signed a seven year lease agreement which commits both parties to working together to develop mutually beneficial solutions, where possible, on the lands known as the “Cobourg Scout Reserve.”
- B) Special events: County Council has been asked to approve event permits for those user groups who previously held such events historically. Proof of insurance and notification to Northumberland O.P.P. and Northumberland EMS are required in advance of the event date. A more explicit policy will be included in the Forest Master Plan.
- C) Fire Services with the Alnwick-Haldimand Fire Department: Five “Forest Fire Risk Meter” signs were installed and operated this year in collaboration with the Alnwick-Haldimand Fire Department. A revised Fire Services Agreement has been provided to the Township of Alnwick-Haldimand for their review and comment. A Fire Management Plan and Risk & Access Assessment has been completed (to be inserted in the Master Plan) and maps can begin to be circulated to emergency responders in the County in early 2009.
- D) Prescribed Burns for prairie restoration: In 2005 the Nature Conservancy of Canada completed a comprehensive tall grass prairie and woodland savannah field inventory in the County Forest. As part of the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative the County has been working towards a tall grass prairie restoration plan for the County Forest. In 2007 the County held its first prescribed burn to help restore two high quality woodland savannah sites, for a total of 35 ha. In 2008 a subsequent burn was conducted at 19 ha. We are currently making plans and arrangements for a 3.4 ha burn for the 2009 season. The decreasing size each year is not indicative of a pattern or of said restoration coming to a termination.
- E) Invasive Species Treatment: In 2007 the County began treating a highly invasive plant known as Dog Strangling Vine in the County Forest. If left untreated this plant can overtake the understory of the forest floor and create a monoculture. The County uses the services of Weed Man to spray the plant with herbicides. The goal is to gain control on the distribution of the plant and reduce it as much as possible, move it away from the trail sides and educate users about how to reduce the spread. In our second year of treatment we are seeing positive results, including a reduced volume.

Further County staff has been monitoring the damage which has occurred, and continues to occur, in many of the sensitive areas of the Forest, such as Lookout Mountain, the “Mud Hole” and a tract heavily used by motorized users (Pratt Road at Dunbar Road). Unfortunately there is significant and increasing damage occurring year to year which is evidenced in the following photographs. The volume of motorized vehicle continues to increase resulting in more and more environmental damage.



Left: Erosion causes further exposure of rocks and roots  
 Center: Further and further erosion and loss of vegetation from heavy usage, the red line shows some scale for depth of erosion  
 Right: damage to a tree from users



Two pictures, taken one year apart, at the same location, show the increasing exposure of rocks and roots



Left: A very steep slope being used by motorized types, loose soil and cobble stones cause a major liability issue  
 Right: sand barren areas provide for intensive motorized use and disturbance

#### **4) Next Steps/Conclusions:**

##### 1) Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan

The Kawartha Conservation Authority recently held an Open House to review their current issues in management of the East Cross Forest, located in Durham region, Township of Scugog. They too are located on the Oak Ridges Moraine, under the Natural Core Area designation of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. The Authority has firmly stated that they believe that motorized use is against the law as per the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. This was the conclusion drawn from a meeting between Kawartha Conservation, who owns and manages the property, and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH). The County has attempted to receive such a statement from the MMAH in regards to our situation but have been referred back to their offices in Kingston and our lawyers. The County has already been made aware that there are several individuals and groups who threaten legal action if motorized use is allowed to continue. With another Forest that has firmly banned such use the County will be under more pressure to make a prompt decision. Comments received from the public during our process largely favour to the elimination of motorized uses in the County.



Pictures from the East Cross Forest: Left-motorized use and abuse, Top Right- a cross to mark the death of someone who tried to drive their vehicle up the hydro tower, Bottom right-more and more trails created by motorized users

## 2) Road Allowances

There are several Township owned road allowances which traverse the County Forest property. They pose some implications as they currently are not part of the Forest but provide extensive access. County staff made a presentation to the Township of Alnwick-Haldimand in March of 2008 to present and discuss options on how the County can address this issue. The County has since solicited the service of Paul Petersen at Hacker-Gignac to work with the County and Township to develop a lease for the Township owned road allowances. Mr. Petersen has been in touch with the planner at the Township of Alnwick-Haldimand to identify which roads are in questions and current management of them. Meetings with the FAC representative for Alnwick-Haldimand and their council are being scheduled.

## 3) FAC, Trail Study & Atlas

The trail study consultant, Dr. Marsh, will meet with each of the user groups and County staff to discuss new trail network options which respect the environmental conditions and hopefully provide a balanced solution going forward. Included in these discussions will be the establishment and/or maintenance of regional trail linkages and trail standards, safety, maintenance, patrolling and signage. The County and Dr. Marsh will assess the feasibility and willingness of user groups to change their current use areas, for example the information in the atlas suggests that it is more reasonable for skiers to recreate on the east side of CR 45 and for more intensive user types to recreate to the west of CR 45.

The Trail Study and Ecological Sensitivities Atlas will be brought to the FAC in January 2009 and then to a public forum as reconciled reports. The atlas will form the basis of an environmental plan for the Forest Master Plan. The draft Forest Master Plan will be written over the spring and presented to the FAC followed by an open house by the summer. Updates to County Council will continue at six month intervals.