



AUSABLE BAYFIELD  
CONSERVATION

CREATING AWARENESS | TAKING ACTION

# Annual Report 2024





## Mission

Protect, improve, conserve and restore the watershed in partnership with the community.

## Vision

Healthy watersheds where our needs and the needs of the natural environment are in balance.

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) acknowledges the original stewards of this land, the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe. We recognize the Huron Tract Treaty signed in 1827. We recognize this territory was subject to the Dish with One Spoon wampum, in which multiple nations agreed to care for the land and resources, including plants and animals, in peace.

As shared stewards of this land and water, ABCA is grateful to work in this territory.



## Groot Family wins Conservationist of the Year Award

Michael and Lindsay Groot and family have planted trees and used no-till crop management and cover crops to reduce runoff and erosion and to build soil health. They have also made other improvements that benefit their Wholesome Pastures farm operation and watershed resources.


*(Photo: Lindsay and Mike with ABCA Chair Marissa Vaughan)*

**Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority Watershed Area At a Glance**



**Population:**  
50,000

**Area:**  
2,428 square kilometres




**More than 30 km of trails at 11 conservation areas**



**Conservation Lands:**  
3,600 hectares (8,895 acres)



**Land Use:**  
84% Agriculture



## Celebrating partnerships and adapting to change

The year 2024 was a chance to celebrate community partnerships. In particular, it was the 50th anniversary of Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation (ABCF) and the 20th anniversary of the MacNaughton-Morrison Section of the South Huron Trail. We commend ABCF on 50 years of sustaining healthy watersheds through active community partnerships. The Foundation raises money for conservation improvements, in watershed communities, and makes important programs possible that could not happen otherwise. During this 50th anniversary year, for ABCF, we thank all the people who have supported its work and who continue this generous support.

One example of the power of community is South Huron Trail. The success of this trail provides evidence of what amazing achievements can happen when a community comes together. Over two decades of the trail we have seen wonderful, successful community initiatives: the creation of the trail; Stirling Bridge; South Huron Trail Mobile; Woodland Reflection Shelter; Jones Bridge; Brian Clarke Memorial Stairs; a kayak launch at Morrison Dam Conservation Area; and much more.

We thank the Municipality of South Huron and all the landowners who, through agreements, generously allow the trail to cross their properties. Countless volunteers, donors, service clubs, and ABCA staff have helped make the trail the wonderful place it is not only to appreciate nature, but also a boost to physical and mental health, and to our local economy.

In addition to thanking the community partners on the Conservation Foundation, and those supporting community trails and conservation areas, we thank our Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) Board of Directors, and staff. We thank the Board and staff for their support and ability to guide ABCA through the 2024 *Conservation Authorities Act* deliverables and changes. These changes include the development of strategic documents that will help guide positive and collaborative change in watershed management. One such document, the *Watershed-Based Resource Management Strategy*, sets the direction of the ABCA's program services and delivery. This meets the needs of ABCA, municipal partners, and watershed residents, while conserving the watershed through an integrated management approach. Other strategic documents, that were completed in 2024, are highlighted throughout the *Annual Report*.

In the spirit of celebrating these important milestones and strategies, this *Annual Report*, for 2024, provides us with many other examples of how community partnerships make our watershed healthier.

*Brian Horner*

**Brian Horner**

Outgoing ABCA General Manager

*Davin Heinbuck*

**Davin Heinbuck**

Incoming ABCA General Manager

*Marissa Vaughan*

**Marissa Vaughan**

Chair, ABCA Board of Directors

## Planning and Regulations



### Inquiries Received

- 835 new files



### Permits Issued

- 105 permits



### Planning

- 160 reviews



### Drain Maintenance

- 38 drain reviews

The above numbers only tell a part of the story. Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) Planning and Regulations staff fielded hundreds more inquiries than just those shown above. These were often from individuals looking to buy a property or inquiring about a new building. Early consultation with ABCA staff frequently results in options for development entirely outside the areas regulated by ABCA, where no permit is required. Consulting with staff often finds solutions that don't require a formal approval by ABCA. Where permits were required early consultation helped ABCA staff to process **96** per cent of its permits in far less time than the performance guidelines recommend.

## Drinking Water Source Protection

### Province approves plan updates

Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks approved Section 34 (initiated by source protection authority) amendments, through *Clean Water Act, 2006*, to the Maitland Valley Source Protection Plan (SPP).

The updated (July) plan included new technical work and new vulnerable area maps for changes to Century Heights & Lucknow municipal drinking water systems. There were no policy changes. Existing policies now apply to revised wellhead protection areas (WHPAs) for these two systems.

Updates to Ausable Bayfield and Maitland Valley SPPs, amended through S. 36, took effect in March. There were new policies to align with 2021 provincial Technical Rules and to address implementation challenges. A revised Belgrave WHPA reflected a new well. There were minor changes to Auburn, Palmerston and Wingham WHPAs.

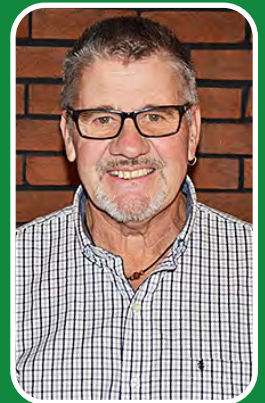
### Water Wise educates hundreds

Six Water Wise events, in partnership with property owners, service clubs and Huron Perth Public Health, educated well owners on testing their water, protecting their water source, and maintaining their well and septic systems. There were **305** attendees at events and **350** well water samples tested.

### DRINKING WATER SOURCE PROTECTION Our Actions Matter

Ausable Bayfield  
Maitland Valley  
Source Protection Region

Sadly, in March 2024, we lost source protection committee member Bert Dykstra. Bert was a farmer and a former member of Central Huron Council for two decades. He served as Warden of Huron County. Bert also proudly served as Huron County Water Protection Steering Committee Chair. "Bert's smile walked into the room before he did," SPC Chair Matt Pearson recalled.



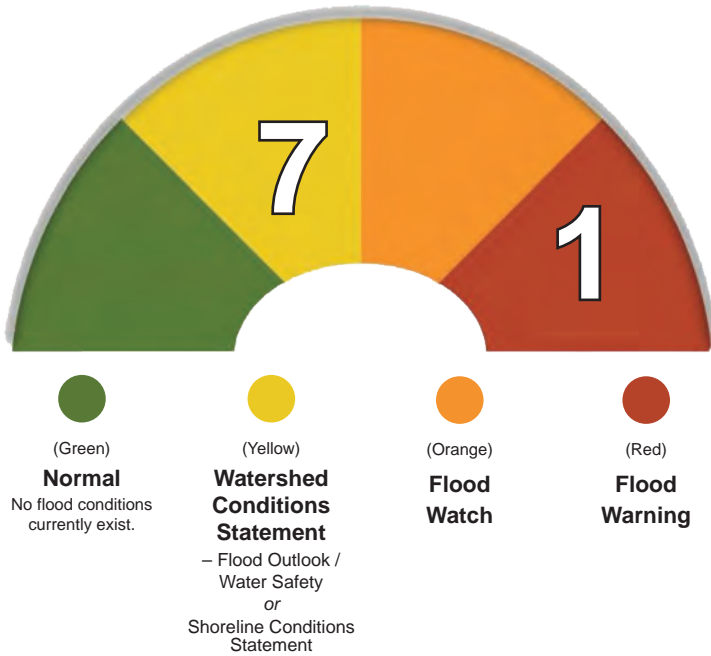
### Progress Report submitted

The **Seventh** Annual Progress Report was completed for the 2023 reporting period. All SPP policies are implemented, in progress, or need no further action. **100%** of significant threats to drinking water are addressed.

### New committee member named

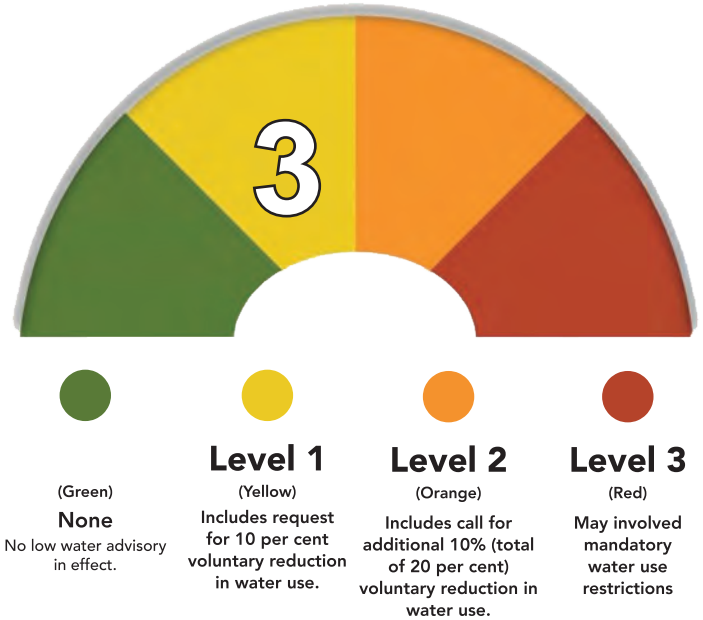
Carol Leeming was appointed to the source protection committee to represent agriculture.

## Flood messages issued in 2024:



Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) issued **7** Watershed Conditions Statements and **1** Flood Warning in 2024.

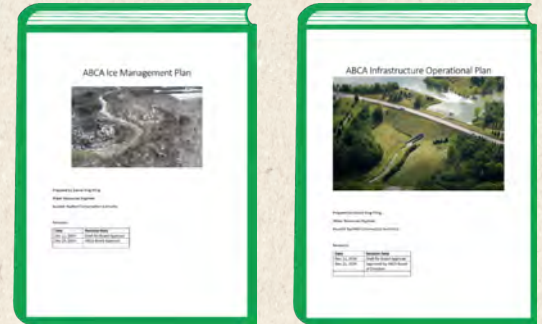
## Months with low water advisories:



Ausable Bayfield Conservation issued Low Water Advisories. These were in effect, in the ABCA watershed, for parts of October-December.

## ABCA prepares Ice Management, Infrastructure Operations plans

To meet provincial requirements under the *Conservation Authorities Act*, Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority staff completed an *Infrastructure Operational Plan* and *Ice Management Plan*. The *Operational Plan* is for Flooding and Erosion Control Infrastructure operated by ABCA. The *Ice Management Plan* details the ice condition monitoring already conducted by ABCA staff for a number of years.



## Thirty attend ABCA's Flood Emergency Planning Meeting

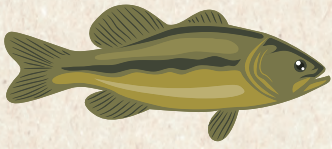


Water Resources Engineer Daniel King gathers data for flood forecasting and warning.

ABCA hosted the annual Flood Emergency Planning Meeting, which focuses on ABCA's emergency preparedness role: monitoring and messaging during flooding events. **30** attendees included representatives of **9** municipalities; community emergency staff from all **4** watershed counties; and Huron and Perth OPP.

*"I appreciate the information ABCA shares every year at the Flood Emergency Workshop. It is beneficial to be updated yearly on the role their staff has in responding to flooding emergencies. It reminds all of us of the monitoring work they do behind the scenes throughout the year. The partnerships that are built across municipal boundaries are integral parts of the overall strategy and demonstrated success thanks to their leadership."* – **South Huron Mayor George Finch**

# Biological Monitoring



## Fish

- 24 sites
- 2,400 fish
- 35 species
- 1 species at risk



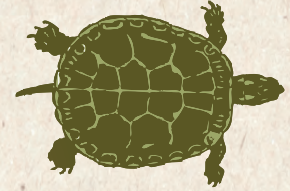
## Mussels

- 5 sites
- 3,282 mussels
- 21 species
- 7 species at risk



## Benthics

- 16 sites sampled
- 3,863 specimens analyzed
- 104 taxa ID'd



## Turtles

- Watershed-wide
- 140 turtles
- 5 species
- 5 species at risk



## Helping communities protect what's important to them

The Municipality of Bluewater; Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks; and Ausable Bayfield Conservation work together to improve water quality conditions for local fish populations. A long-term fish monitoring site in the Ausable watershed is regularly assessed to evaluate remediation efforts put in place to improve fish habitat, specifically for Brook Trout. This monitoring tracks changes in fish communities and helps inform management decisions.



More than **2,000** mussels (including species at risk) were found at a single site near Ailsa Craig.

**65** turtles were included in a study to learn more about habitat, population size and health, and changes in the population following years of community monitoring and habitat improvements.

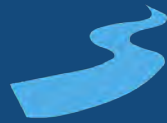


# Water Monitoring



## Beaches

- 9 beaches sampled
- 304 samples analyzed
- 90% of samples within safe guidelines



## Streams and Wetlands

- 21 sites sampled
- 430 samples collected
- 53 metrics monitored



## Rain Events

- 12 sites monitored
- 205 sites submitted
- 16 metrics monitored

*"I love giving back to the community but helping our planet Earth makes it even more special!"*  
– Mercedes Prout,  
Eco Exeter Student

Wetlands help to improve water quality and reduce soil erosion for creeks, rivers and Lake Huron. Stewardship projects also contribute to cleaner drinking water and healthier soils for growing crops.



**Landowners restored a record 23 wetlands in 2024**

## Farmers lead cover crop research with support of Grassroots grant



Drone plants cover crops at Huronview Demonstration Farm

A partnership with Huron County Soil and Crop Improvement Association (HSCIA) supports local agricultural producers in their efforts to integrate late-season cover crops into their rotations.

Cover crops help build healthy soils by providing organic matter, scavenging nutrients, suppressing weeds and reducing erosion.

Eleven Huron County farmers planted either cereal rye, oats, or camelina just before or after harvesting their corn and soybeans in autumn. Over the next two years, HSCIA will investigate the impact of late-season cover crops on subsequent crops, and their potential benefits to soil health and water quality.



## Teaching the Community about Science at Work

A tour of the Southern Ontario Butternut Seed Orchard, at Triebner Tract, was hosted to share information about Butternut recovery efforts. Butternut is a native tree and species at risk.



**243** landowners planted **34,635** trees



**6,239,366** trees planted (since 1946)



**5,373** native plants planted



**23** wetlands restored by **11** landowners  
**171** wetlands restored (since 2008)



**6** management plans promoting healthy forests



**22** invasive species management projects



More than **2,000** hectares of over-wintered cover crops planted

## Did you know?

Imagine you planted an Oak tree, way back in **1946** when ABCA began.

Today, that Oak tree would be **78** years old.

Today, that single Oak tree would capture up to **41** pounds of carbon each year.

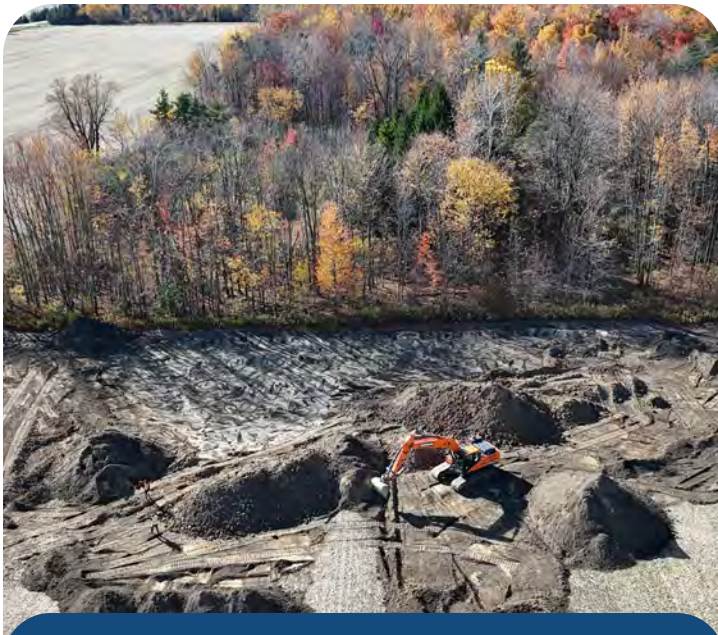
(Calculated using the tree carbon calculator at [TreePlantation.com](https://www.treeplantation.com))



## Local Investment, Local Action

Ausable Bayfield Conservation’s stewardship program supports landowners implementing projects on their properties that contribute to healthy watersheds. The investment made by partner municipalities provides the foundation for the program and allows staff to access funding from other sources, providing landowners with access to additional funding opportunities to support their projects. **A project value of \$613,000 means that every dollar invested in the program through the municipal levy was matched with more than \$4 from other sources.** Local businesses, suppliers, contractors, and more all help implement stewardship projects, demonstrating the program’s ability to benefit local environmental conditions and be a local economic driver.

Stewardship Projects and Grants by Municipality		
Municipality	Projects	Grants
Bluewater	40	\$102,533
Central Huron	17	\$87,723
Huron East	24	\$49,314
Lambton Shores	4	\$4,771
Lucan Biddulph	7	\$16,323
Middlesex Centre	3	\$12,066
North Middlesex	30	\$41,624
South Huron	27	\$50,988
Warwick	2	\$3,449
West Perth	5	\$18,378
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>\$387,169</b>
Total Reported Project Value: <b>\$613,000</b>		



### Working with landowners, businesses to build wetlands

Working with participating local landowners, and local contractors, Ausable Bayfield Conservation is helping people to build needed wetlands and improve wetland conditions. In photo above, ABCA worked with Phil McNamee and local contractors, at Serenity Nature Reserve, to enhance a wetland for the future.



### Demonstrating stewardship on ABCA lands

An Invasive Buckthorn management trial in Hay Swamp tested three techniques for long-term success and cost-effectiveness. One of the techniques (pictured) used equipment to mulch Buckthorn. The project was supported by the Invasive Species Action Fund, and Huron Clean Water Project.



## Ten hectares of Hay Swamp Provincially Significant Wetland permanently protected

The purchase was supported by the Nature Smart Climate Solutions Fund, an Environment and Climate Change Canada program, in partnership with Conservation Ontario.



**3,672** hectares of conservation lands



**32.5** kilometres of trails



**3,691** people participated in **123** conservation education programs at conservation areas



**41,629** people visited Rock Glen Conservation Area



Hosted **2** planting events and property tours



## ABCA approves first Conservation Lands Strategy

The *Conservation Lands Strategy* guides use of ABCA lands. Public and stakeholder input helped to ensure the strategy considers needs of the environment and the community. This feedback is summarized on the next page.



## Improved Conservation Area Infrastructure

Through consultation, the community expressed interest in seeing improvements to conservation area infrastructure. This year, staff installed a new privy washroom at Ausable River Cut Conservation Area, and improved parking areas at three properties.

## Program Priorities

Respondents identified the following as the most important management priorities of the conservation lands program:

1. Ecological protection and restoration
2. Acquiring additional conservation lands
3. Enforcement of conservation area rules

## Community Use



50% of respondents visit ABCA property at least once per week



Conservation areas help people find adventure, enjoy family, solitude



Hiking, nature appreciation, walking dogs on leash among activities

“  
Fishing finally got my son off screen time ...  
”

92 per cent of respondents identified conservation lands as very important for watershed health.

## Connecting with the Community

The community expressed interest in taking part in more events at conservation areas.

“  
I really like the way ABCA partners with like-minded community groups and volunteers.  
”

The community learns of opportunities from:

- Partnerships with community groups
- Social media and website
- Conservation area signs

## Conservation Lands Experience

Respondents felt the visiting experience may be enhanced by:



- Updating, enhancing infrastructure
- Creating more trails
- Providing more conservation education resources
- Maintaining conservation areas during winter

## Thank you for following us on website and social media



- **90,000** abca.ca website views in 2024
- **70,000** web users in a year!
- Top pages include Conservation Areas; Employment; Contact Staff; Mapping; Trees; Notices; Planning; Education; Flood Messages



- **50,000+** video views on YouTube!
- **Top Two**, in Ontario, per capita, in subscriptions among 36 conservation authorities
- More than **140** videos



- **100,000+** video views on Meta!
- **3,200** followers
- **2,700** page likes
- **1,000s** engaged
- **Tens of thousands** reached!



- **36,000** annual impressions
- **1,350** followers
- **300+** Tweets per year
- Healthy Lake Huron also on X/Twitter



- **40,000** annual impressions
- **943** followers
- **1,800** likes in one year
- **300+** posts
- **30,000+** reach



- **26,000** impressions in one year!
- **373** followers
- **450** engagements
- New in 2022!
- Thanks for following us!

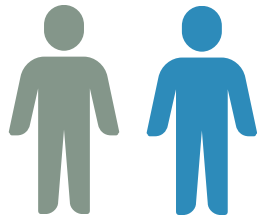


- **7,000** followers on social media!
- More than **280** subscribers to our e-newsletter.
- **Subscribe today to our newsletter emails!**



Conservation education fosters environmental appreciation and nurtures positive action. We achieve this through curriculum-based experiences. We also grow awareness and action through community events with non-profit groups, libraries, Scouts and Girl Guides, summer and March Break nature day camps, and more.

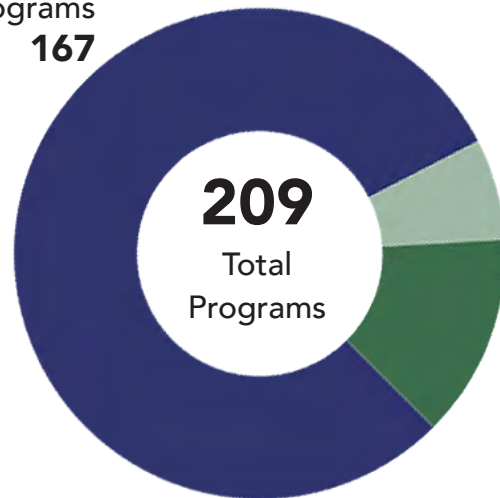
Number of people educated: **5,657**



**84%** **16%**  
Students Adults



School Programs **167**

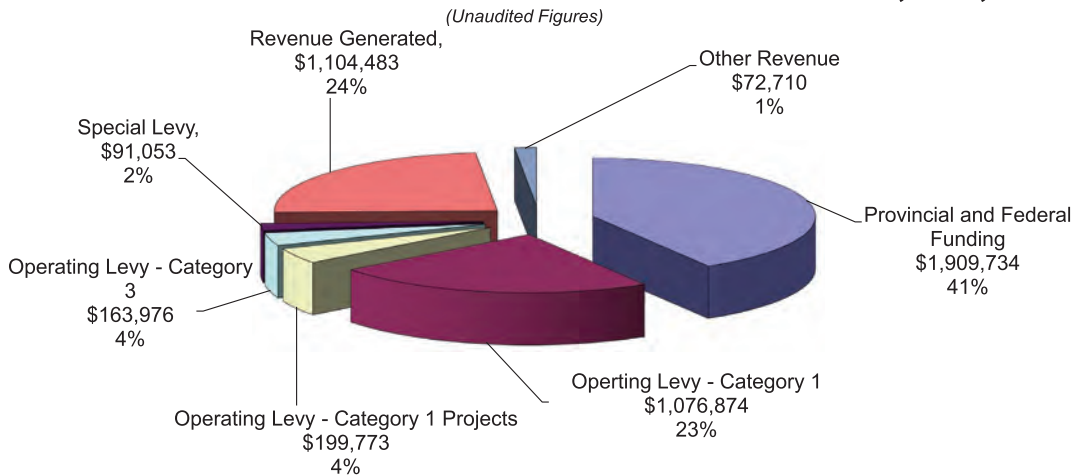


Spring Water Awareness **14**  
Non-Profit Groups **28**

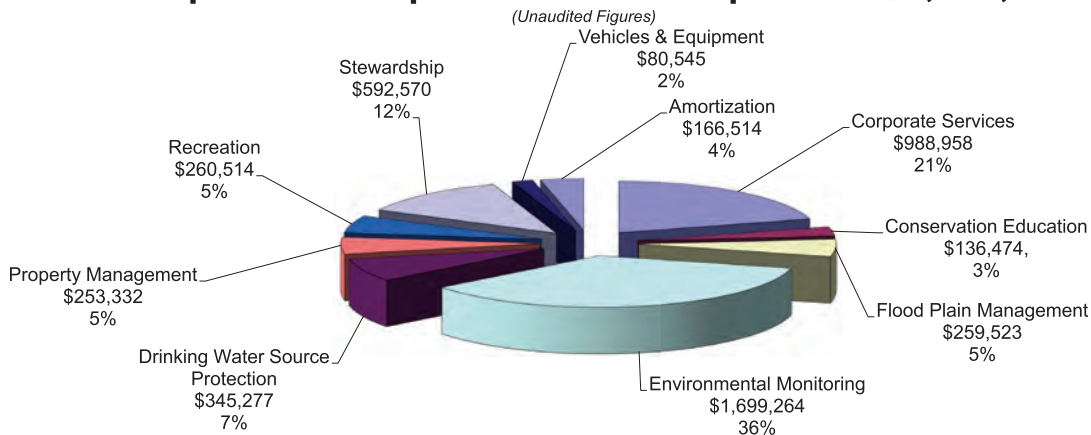
### Special Events

- **111** attended annual Owl Prowl
- **3** Environmental Forums hosted by Avon Maitland District School Board
- **100+** students at regional Envirothon
- More than **800** educated at local fairs
- More than **250** Specialist High Skills Major students educated in Agriculture and Environment sectors

## 2024 Sources of Revenue – Total Revenue: \$4,618,604



## 2024 Department Expenses – Total Expenses: \$4,782,972



## Each local dollar works like three

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) continues to be one of the leading conservation authorities in Ontario when it comes to creating value for money invested by leveraging local levy dollars to generate third-party funding that supports local programs.

Thanks to the approval of grant and funding applications submitted by staff during the year, the local levy dollars represented approximately 30 per cent of total revenue.

Similar to the past few years, ABCA has continued to leverage every local dollar generated, to bring in approximately \$2.50 in additional funding. This compares to the provincial average that is roughly dollar for dollar among other conservation authorities.

The unaudited financial results show ABCA again coming in around budget as the \$164,000 loss includes \$166,000 of amortization. Staff have continued to do a terrific job in bringing projects in at, or better than, budgeted costs.

We again would like to thank our member municipalities for their continued involvement and commitment to their local watershed.



### ABCA approves Capital Asset Management Plan

ABCA is responsible for management of capital assets including land, buildings, erosion and flood control structures, vehicles and equipment. Recent changes to the *Conservation Authorities Act* have required conservation authorities to complete a Capital Asset Management Plan (CAMP) by December 31, 2024 as one of the requirements of the Operational Plan for flood and erosion control structures. ABCA has taken the opportunity to complete a more comprehensive CAMP that includes all ABCA capital assets. Development of the CAMP is an essential part of ABCA's ongoing fiscal responsibility, guiding the purchase, use, maintenance, and disposal of ABCA assets. Further, it supports the sustainable delivery of conservation authority services. ABCA's Board of Directors approved the CAMP in 2024.

## Message from Chair Dave Frayne:

On behalf of Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation (ABCF) we thank everyone who has supported the Conservation Foundation's work, since receiving its charter (Province of Ontario Letters Patent) on June 1, 1974.

In 2024, ABCF celebrated 50 years of sustaining healthy watersheds through active community partnerships in the Ausable Bayfield area.

During this 50th anniversary year, we thank all the people who have helped us to make great things possible.



2024 winner Emily Dearing receives \$1,000 Student Environmental Grant from Dave Frayne, ABCF Chair.

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation would like to thank all our partners in conservation in 2024. Those partners include donors and community volunteers and supporters of our fundraising events. We would also like to make special note of the following:



## DINNER RAISES TENS OF THOUSANDS FOR COMMUNITY

The 34th Conservation Dinner took place on Thursday, April 11, 2024 at South Huron Recreation Centre in Exeter. Shown in photo, from left to right, are: Dave Frayne, Chair of ABCF; Darryl Beaver, President of Exeter Lions Club; Marissa Vaughan, Chair of Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA); Davin Heinbuck, ABCA General Manager/Secretary-Treasurer; and Chris Keller, Chair of the Conservation Dinner Committee.

- Exeter Lions Club
- Lakeshore Eco-Network
- Friends of South Huron Trail
- Friends of North Middlesex Trails
- Huron Tract Land Trust Conservancy
- ... and you!

*Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation supports local conservation, in the watershed, such as:*



Species-at-Risk  
Monitoring



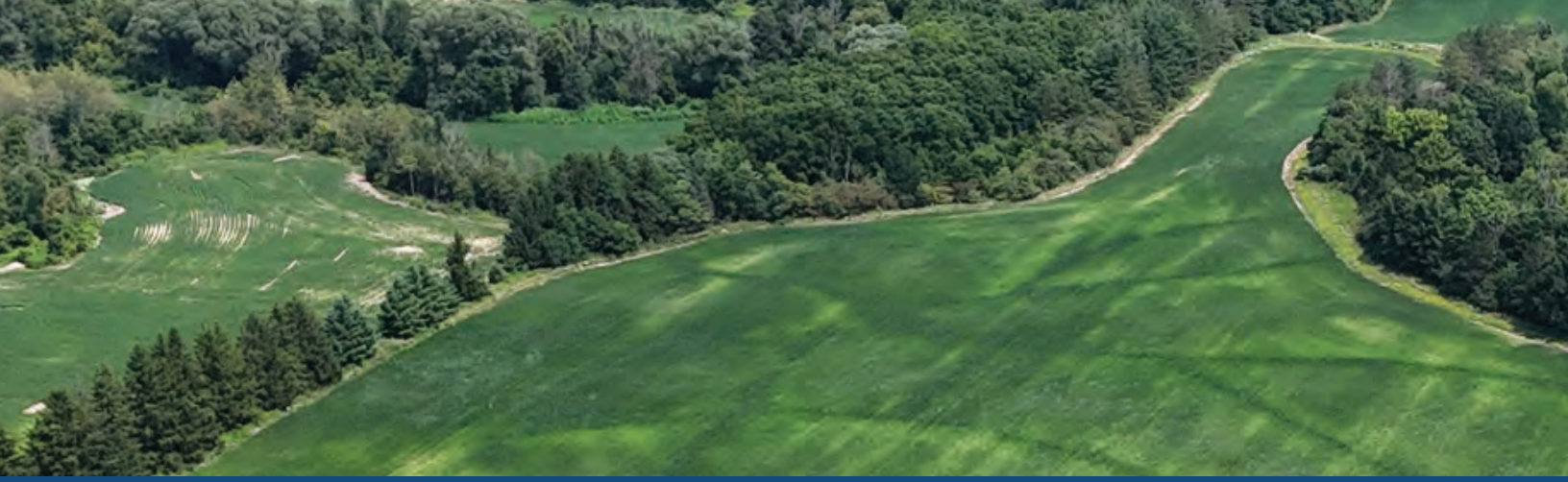
Opportunities  
for Youth



Conservation  
Education



Development,  
Maintenance of Trails



In 2024, Rita and the late Tutis Vilis donated their 50-acre property near Lieury, establishing the Vilis Family Wildlife Area. The property is comprised of deciduous forest that protects the flood plains and valley lands of Mud Creek, which bisects the property. The Vilis family expanded and enhanced natural areas through tree and prairie planting, and by restoring wetlands. Hiking trails will be established and maintained for the public to enjoy the natural areas on the property. The property was donated to Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation (ABCF), and will be managed by Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA). Both organizations are honoured to have the opportunity to steward this generous conservation gift to the community.



Celebrating Conservation Foundation and South Huron Trail anniversaries, at Woodland Reflection Shelter, are (left to right): Norm Eckel; George Godbolt; Jim Hayter; George Finch; Lorne Rideout; Carol Rideout; Suzie McComb; Sharon O’Toole; Jim O’Toole; Charles Miner; George Irvin; Janet Clarke; Bob Radtke; and Dave Frayne.

## Developing trail in Parkhill

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation was excited to partner, with Friends of North Middlesex Trails, to raise funds for a new Parkhill trail.

Thanks go to the almost 90 people who attended the Greek Night fundraiser and to those donors who supported the project on GivingTuesday. Continued community support is needed to make this accessible trail project happen. Donate today.



