



AUSABLE BAYFIELD
CONSERVATION

CREATING AWARENESS | TAKING ACTION

Annual Report 2025



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.



Looking forward to continued partnership with you

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority has accomplished a lot since its start in 1946. We have protected life and property from natural hazards such as flooding and erosion while working in partnership with the community to improve watershed health.

The year 2025 was another busy one. We worked with rural landowners and other partners to protect and enhance wetlands, water quality, and forest conditions. We worked with Departments and Ministries and community groups, continuing a legacy of long-term monitoring. We reached and exceeded performance benchmarks for service delivery. Our watershed residents, and our staff, can be proud of the work they do.

The Province of Ontario has proposed dramatic changes to local delivery of conservation. How this all plays out in 2026 and beyond remains to be seen but we are committed to our partners and the great work we do together. While decision-makers decide the structure of conservation services in Ontario, we are committed to focus on the work that needs to be done, as the community has asked us to do.

We are thankful for all of our community partners and the dedication of the ABCA Board of Directors and staff, for prioritizing resiliency and relationships. We look forward to 2026, when ABCA celebrates its 80th anniversary, and to continued work, with you, to build healthier watersheds in the decades to come.



Ray Chartrand
ABCA Chair



Davin Heinbuck
ABCA General Manager
and Secretary-Treasurer

Ray Chartrand

**Chair,
ABCA Board of Directors**

Davin Heinbuck

**General Manager
and Secretary-Treasurer**

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.



Mercedes Prout, a Grade 12 student at South Huron District High School, was Junior Conservationist at Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority in 2025. The Exeter-area student helped with nature day camps and with water sampling and monitoring, for *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) levels, at Lake Huron sites. She also helped at tree planting sites and with monitoring of mussel populations.

“... Without this experience, I never would have understood the true range of conservation work, or the massive positive difference it makes ...”
 – Mercedes Prout
 2025 Junior Conservationist


The Junior Conservationist two-month summer job experience program is possible thanks to financial support from Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation and its donors and fundraising supporters.

Lambton Shores Nature Trails win Conservationist of the Year Award


Close to 100 people attended the Partner Appreciation Evening hosted by Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) in 2025. Nathan Schoelier and ABCA Chair Ray Chartrand presented the Conservationist of the Year Award to Lambton Shores Nature Trails directors Mary Lou Tasko and Diane Smith.




Ausable Bayfield Watershed Area At a Glance




50,000 people




2,428 square kilometres



30 km of trails at 11 conservation areas



3,720 hectares (9,192 acres) of conservation lands



84% Agricultural

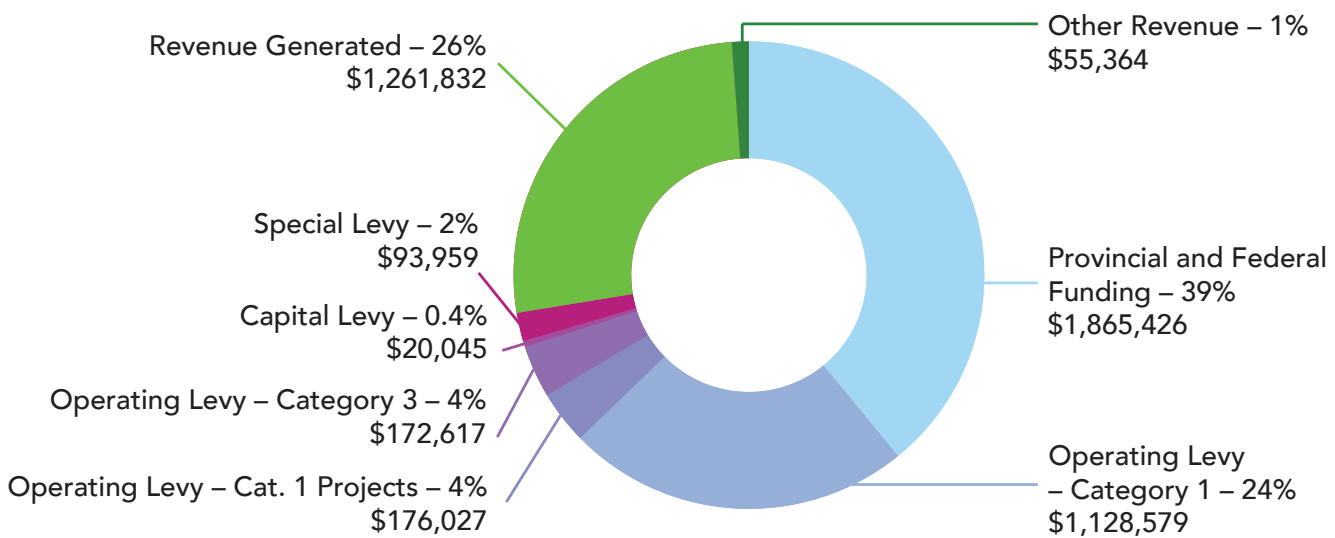
We make each local dollar work like three for community

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority continues to be one of the leading conservation authorities in Ontario when it comes to leveraging local levy dollars with third-party funding.

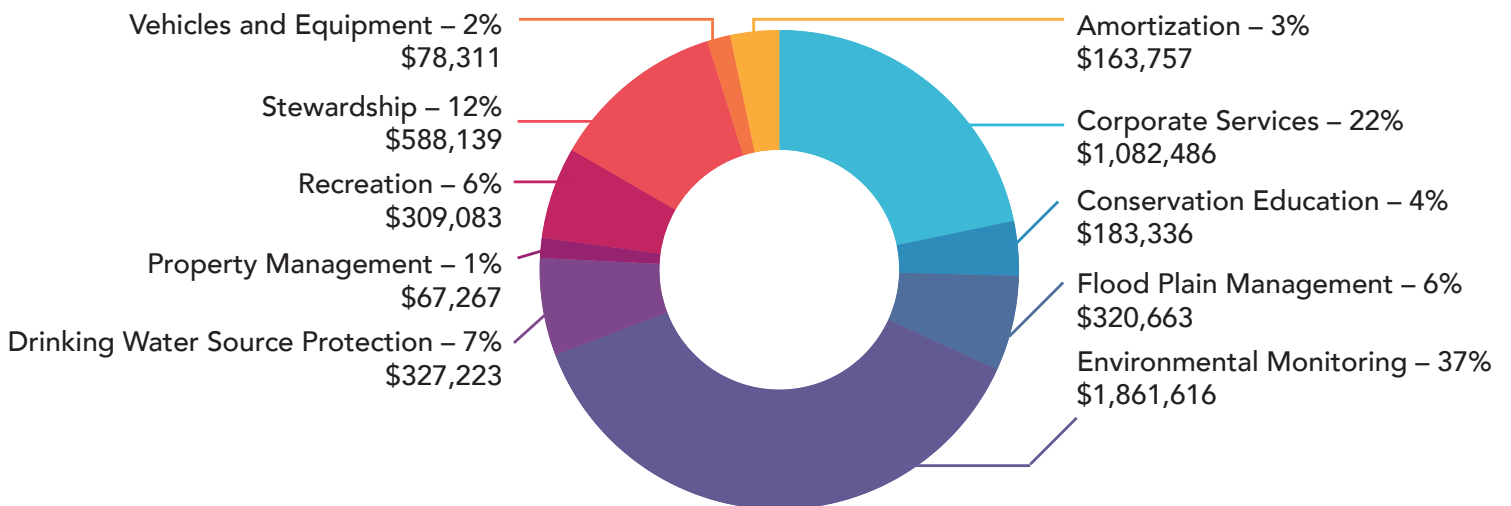
Thanks to the approval of grant and funding applications submitted by staff during the year the local levy dollars represented approximately 30 per cent of total revenue.

Similar to past years, this conservation authority has continued to leverage each local dollar generated with approximately \$2.5 in additional funding from other sources. This compares to the provincial average that is dollar for dollar for other conservation authorities. We again would like to thank our member municipalities for their continued involvement and commitment to their local watershed.

Revenue – \$4,773,849*



Expenses – \$4,981,880*



* Unaudited figures



Conservation educators cultivate stewards of tomorrow

The conservation education department, at Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA), cultivates stewardship of water, soil and habitat and informed action. They do this by delivering curriculum-based programs and community-focused learning opportunities. They develop partnerships with schools, non-profits, libraries, youth organizations, and host summer nature day camps and pre-school programs. Conservation educators inspire meaningful connections to nature and lasting conservation action. In 2025, ABCA continued to grow and develop conservation education programs to serve the watershed community.



Group Programs

- ✓ 145 school programs
- ✓ 3,686 attendees
- ✓ Across 35 institutions
- ✓ 35 community groups with 815 participants



Public Programs

- ✓ 6 weeks of day camp with 120 participants
- ✓ 5 preschool programs with 64 families and 89 children



Special Events

- ✓ 10 attended events with 1,163 participants
- ✓ 3 local fairs
- ✓ 6 planting events at 5 properties

Measuring what matters ...



Exclusion fencing saves turtles

Ten years ago, the Municipality of Lambton Shores installed 280 metres of fencing. The fence funnels animals safely under the road that bisects a provincially significant wetland. Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) monitoring shows a 93 per cent reduction in turtles on the road.

Read more about saving turtles from roads: catalog.ontarionature.org/summer-2025/page/10-11



5,352

fish identified and re-released at 40 sites



751

mussels found and identified at 8 sites



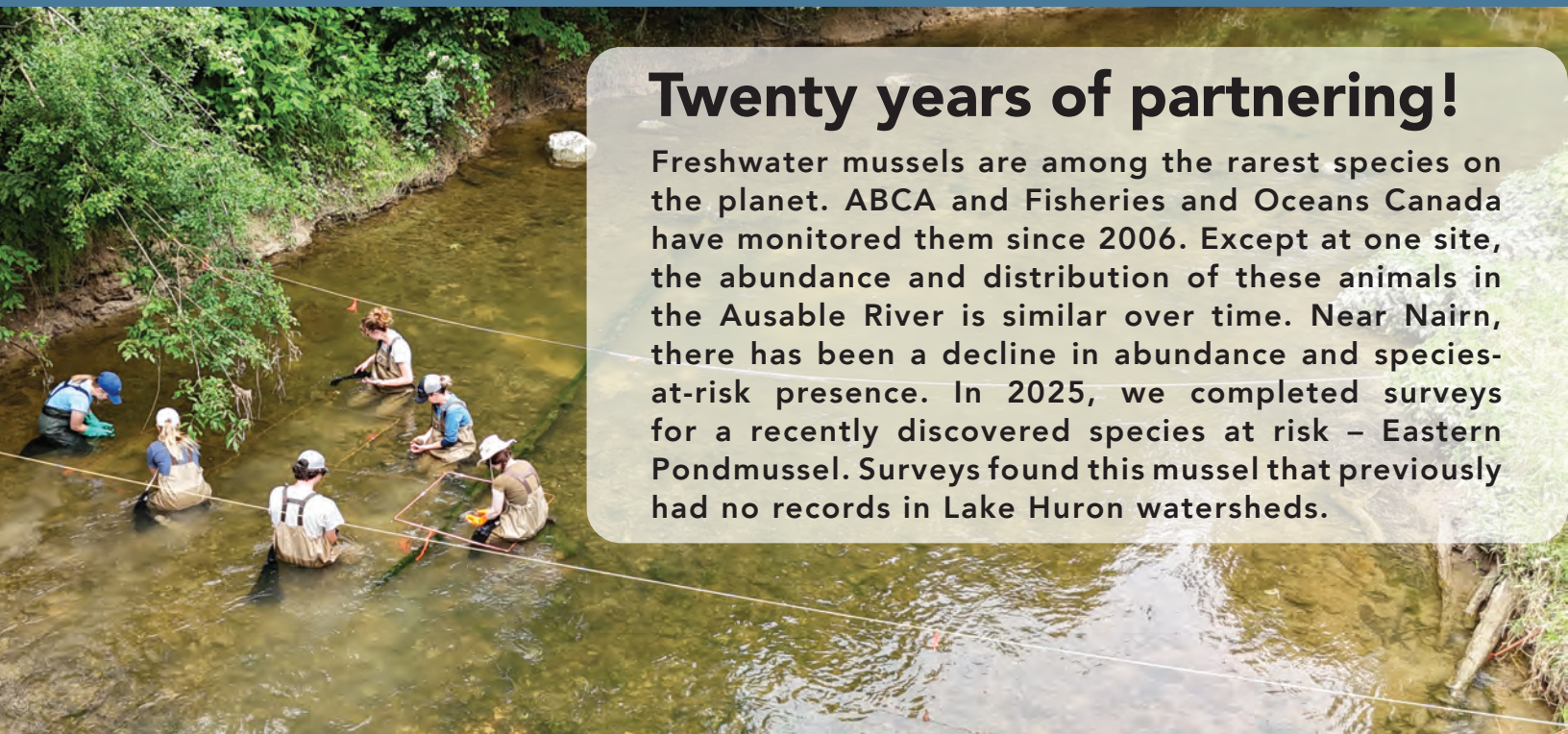
3,444

specimens analyzed at 16 sites



146

turtles observed by watershed community



Twenty years of partnering!

Freshwater mussels are among the rarest species on the planet. ABCA and Fisheries and Oceans Canada have monitored them since 2006. Except at one site, the abundance and distribution of these animals in the Ausable River is similar over time. Near Nairn, there has been a decline in abundance and species-at-risk presence. In 2025, we completed surveys for a recently discovered species at risk – Eastern Pondmussel. Surveys found this mussel that previously had no records in Lake Huron watersheds.

Partnering for water quality improvement

Thank you to Southcott Pines and Huron Woods for your work to protect and enhance the Old Ausable Channel.

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA), with University of Toronto PhD student Jennifer Powell, shaded the bottom of the channel and planted stock from Pinery Provincial Park to reduce invasive plants.

ABCA sampled water for the Canadian Water Monitoring Program for pesticides.

This data will be used by groups who make decisions related to pesticides, including federal, provincial, and local partners. Funding came from Health Canada.

Thank you to Huron County Soil and Crop Improvement Association.

Local farmers are showing successful rates of seeding and application methods for cover crops following corn and soybean harvest. We see more overwinter green fields.



227

samples analyzed from 5 beaches;
98% of samples met safe for recreation guidelines



510

samples collected from 30 sites
(streams and wetlands)



205

event samples submitted from 15 sites

Partnering for landscape improvement

A newly constructed wetland, adjacent to the Ausable River, captures runoff from New Moon Farm, providing storage and filtration.

Stewardship by the numbers

In 2025, Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) planted 5,000 trees at Serenity Nature Reserve, owned and managed by the Phil McNamee Charitable Foundation. ABCA also planted 1,750 trees at Linfield Wildlife Area, owned and managed by ABCA. With public access to both sites, visitors can enjoy the outdoors while seeing the forest grow first-hand.



31,696 trees planted by **190** landowners



6,271, 062 trees planted since 1946



8 management plans to promote healthy forests



6,695 native plants planted (2025); **52,508** since 2008



3 landowners restored **3** wetlands; **174** wetlands restored since 2008



22 invasive species management projects

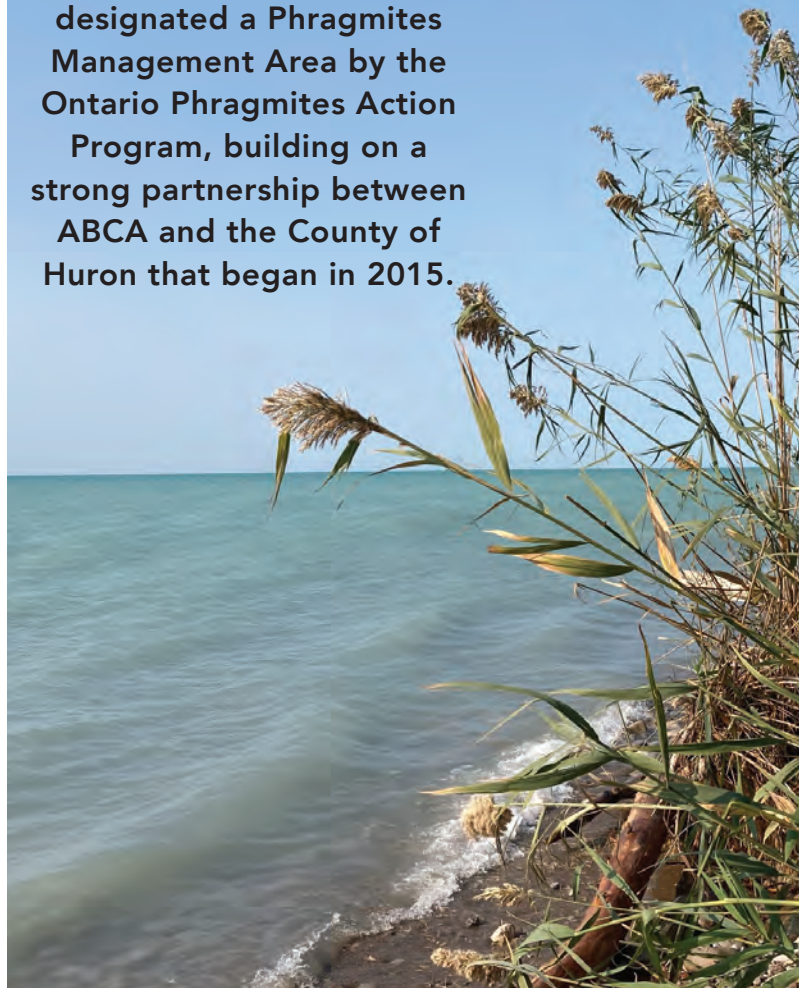


17 agricultural erosion-control structures constructed



More than **5,000** acres of overwintered cover crops

Huron County was designated a Phragmites Management Area by the Ontario Phragmites Action Program, building on a strong partnership between ABCA and the County of Huron that began in 2015.



Local Investment, Local Action, Local Economic Driver

From farm supply stores selling cover crop seed, to contractors constructing wetlands, erosion control berms, and decommissioning abandoned wells, to nurseries growing trees and plants, local businesses and service providers all play a role in the stewardship program at Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA). A program strength is its ability to leverage local investment and secure external funding to support watershed landowners in implementing projects.

This strengthens the local economy while contributing to healthier watersheds.

The program demonstrated this strength by implementing **148** projects in 2025 with a total project value of **\$752,389**.

There was **\$150,288** invested into the stewardship and complementary monitoring programs, which means that every local dollar invested in the program through the municipal levy was matched with \$4 from other sources.

Stewardship Projects

MUNICIPALITY	PROJECTS	GRANTS	MUNICIPALITY	PROJECTS	GRANTS
Adelaide Metcalfe	2	\$12,414	Lucan Biddulph	8	\$9,978
Bluewater	29	\$190,301	Middlesex Centre	6	\$24,325
Central Huron	14	\$40,095	North Middlesex	26	\$53,500
Huron East	21	\$44,423	South Huron	34	\$123,168
Lambton Shores	5	\$8,198	West Perth	3	\$3,285
TOTAL NUMBER OF PROJECTS: 148 • TOTAL AMOUNT OF GRANTS: \$509,687					
Total reported project value: \$752,389					



Connecting science, stewardship and conservation lands

Biological monitoring, such as tracking fish and mussel species, provides key environmental indicators to assess the effectiveness of best management practices, including stewardship projects. Long-term monitoring is particularly valuable as it reveals trends over time rather than one-time conditions and helps secure funding for species conservation that supports on-the-ground stewardship efforts. Conservation lands provide consistent locations for this monitoring to be carried out and revisited.

In 2025, ABCA staff completed surveys of fish populations in the Morrison Dam and Parkhill reservoirs. ABCA has conducted monitoring of the reservoirs, for fish and fish habitat, on four occasions since 1986. Staff found the type of fish species was similar with previous sampling years. This was true for both reservoir sites. New species documented in 2025 included: Northern Pike in Morrison Dam Reservoir and Bluegill Sunfish in Parkhill Reservoir.

Sixty-five acres of the Ausable River Valley Gorge permanently protected

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) acquired a property to establish the Spruce Tract, a diverse forested parcel within the provincially designated Ausable River Valley Life Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI).

ANSIs are areas of land and water containing unique natural landscapes or features.



3,720 hectares of conservation lands



32.5 kilometres of trails



45,100 people visited Rock Glen Conservation Area



3,399 participants in conservation education at conservation areas



Through consultation, the community expressed interest in seeing improvements to conservation area infrastructure.

In 2025, ABCA staff:

- ✓ Installed new washrooms at Bannockburn, Clinton and Lucan conservation areas
- ✓ Improved a pedestrian bridge at Morrison Dam Conservation Area
- ✓ With financial support from Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation, installed 10 signs at properties near Grand Bend.



Jaden Schoelier and Millie Ghorbankhani are Water and Planning Technicians with Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA). When considering a project, it's always a good idea to contact our staff early on.



600
new
inquiries



167
permits
issued



152
planning
reviews



32
Drainage Act
reviews

ABCA staff help to keep people and properties safe. Staff, in 2025, successfully processed 97 per cent of the permits issued in less time than performance guidelines recommend.

Thanks to early communication between public and our staff, permit times are reduced and non-regulatory solutions developed

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority has acted for decades, as a lead agency, commenting on development applications where there are natural hazards such as flooding and erosion.

ABCA staff understand the hazards and play a key role toward ensuring new development is responsible and safe.

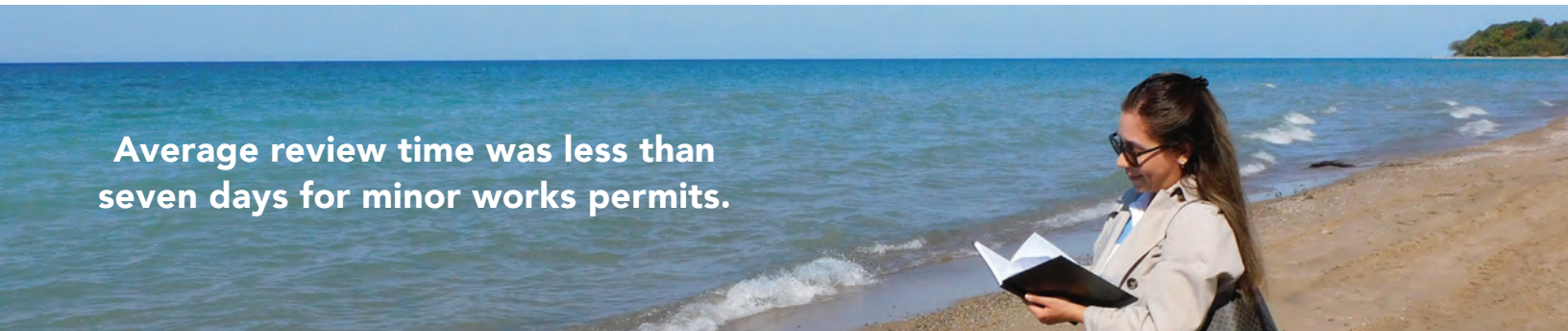
Early consultation with conservation authority staff – having access to resources, local expertise and experience – leads to a better understanding

of the ABCA's role, the nature of the hazard, the legislation, regulations and permitting requirements.

When staff are consulted early in the planning process, valuable advice is offered and, in many cases, the need for a permit under conservation authority regulations is avoided.

Prior to receiving a permit application, staff are pleased to meet virtually or in person with the public, often at no cost.

Average review time was less than seven days for minor works permits.





The Ausable Bayfield Maitland Valley Drinking Water Source Protection Committee helps to protect municipal drinking water sources by reducing risk from threat activities. Left to right (front row) are: Mary Ellen Foran; Joy Rutherford; Carol Leeming; Alyssa Keller; and Philip Keightley; Doug Hocking. Not in photo is Jennette Walker.

New environment rep. on committee

Joy Rutherford joined the Source Protection Committee as environmental representative in February 2025. The Wingham resident has a Professional Geoscientist Certification and Bachelor of Environmental Studies in Physical Geography from University of Waterloo.



Joy Rutherford
New SPC
environment rep.

Our source protection region welcomed Ellen Westelaken, in 2025, as Drinking Water Source Protection Specialist and Risk Management Official/Inspector. From the St. Marys area, she has a Master's degree in Environmental Science from University of Guelph.



Ellen Westelaken
DWSP Specialist



Province making changes to Act

The Province of Ontario made changes and proposed changes to *Clean Water Act, 2006*:

- ✓ Bill 56 made minor amendments to streamline ways drinking water sources are protected.
- ✓ Other proposed changes would allow local source protection authorities to approve some routine updates to source protection plans instead of requiring Ministerial approval.
- ✓ Another proposed change would allow the quicker use of new drinking water sources (such as wells and intakes) where source protection measures are in place.

Education

- ✓ Our source protection region created materials to support municipalities, implementing bodies for a source protection plan education policy.
- ✓ Conservation Ontario created a video commemorating 20 years of drinking water source protection in Ontario.

Highlights

- ✓ 70 risk management plans are in effect to address threats to municipal drinking water sources.
- ✓ Thanks to funding from Huron County Clean Water Project, a Water Wise event was held in Dublin in April 2025 for private well owners.

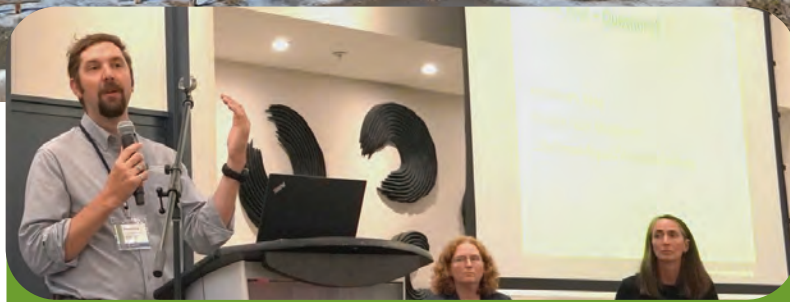


Ice jam, breakup and flooding at Port Franks on March 7, 2025.

Keeping watershed prepared

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority (ABCA) staff monitor **13** streamflow gauges and weather stations to provide data for flood forecasts and messages. Crews take photos and measure flooding extent of flood events.

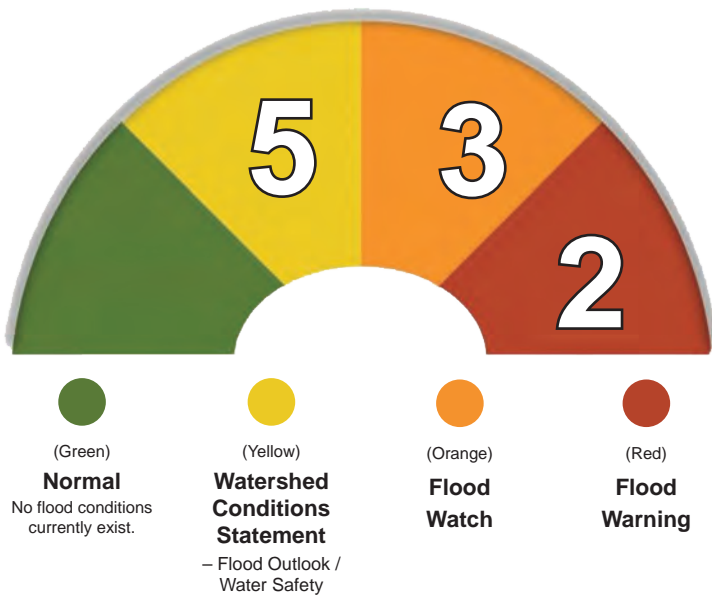
ABCA hosts an annual flood emergency planning meeting. Thirty people attended, including Fire Chiefs, local public health, county and municipal representatives and Community Emergency Management Coordinators. ABCA's Christie Brown and Davin Heinbuck provided updates on watershed conditions, with low-moderate risk of flooding, and flood emergency roles and responsibilities. Engineers James Bryant and Lina Florian, of Essex Region Conservation, spoke on a 2023 storm event.



"I appreciated the presentation, by ABCA's Daniel King, during the panel discussion at the Provincial Flood Forecasting and Warning Workshop. His overview of the daily planning cycle at ABCA was thorough and helpful to understand which items should be documented for decision-making and record-keeping during a flood event."

Jessica Penz,
Upper Thames River
Conservation Authority

Flood messages issued in 2025:



Months with low water advisories:





Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation (ABCF) was honoured to receive the Huron County Award of Merit for Barrier-Free Access for the South Huron Trail Mobile. The Strang family donated the first Trail Mobile in 2006. In 2025, generous community donors, including Bob Down and several others, helped to upgrade the second Trail Mobile (a four-seater) to a new model with six seats, allowing more people with mobility challenges to enjoy nature time out in nature. Thanks go to the dedicated volunteer drivers, Norm Eckel and Jim Hayter!



ABCF Chair Charles Miner presents \$1,000 Student Environmental Grant award to Will VanDongen-Miles.

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

Vilis Family Wildlife Area



Thank you to the 50 enthusiastic students from McGillivray Central Public School, who planted 30 trees to enhance the walking trail!

These students also learned the importance and purpose of trees, forests and native plants in our watershed.



Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation (ABCF) was excited to announce Vilis Family Wildlife Area opened to the public in 2025, with two kilometres of walking trails constructed. A dedication ceremony was held in June 2025.

A very special thank you goes to Rita and the late Tutis Vilis, who generously donated

this 50-acre property to ABCF in 2024. The Vilis Family made many enhancements to the property including tree and prairie planting, and restoring wetlands.

ABCF and Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority are honoured to continue to care for this special property.



Thanks to donors for fundraising success

Ausable Bayfield Conservation Foundation and Exeter Lions Club thank generous local donors and bidders for having raised more than \$30,000 for needed community projects through the 35th Conservation Auction and 50-50 Raffle! There are many ways to give. Contact us to learn more.

