

July 17, 2023

Mayor Mark Sutcliffe

110 Laurier Ave West
Ottawa, ON
K1P 1J1

Re: Loss of rural woodlands in Ottawa

Dear Mayor,

We are writing to you about Ottawa's trees. We are pleased to hear you describe the benefits of trees and promote tree planting, but there is more to do.

Ottawa has always been proud of its forests. Before amalgamation the National Capital Commission found that the Ottawa-Gatineau region was almost 50% treed, making it the most wooded built-up area in Canada. With Ottawa's expansion into its rural periphery in 2001, another assessment indicated that the newer, bigger Ottawa had 40% tree cover, still a respectable figure. However, by 2022 tree cover had decreased by 5% (Global Forest Watch , 2023).

Ottawa's new Official Plan sets a tree canopy target of 40%, in line with what we had in 2001. It states that, for rural areas, the City ***"shall take a no net loss approach with respect to evaluated wetlands deemed not provincially significant and forest cover outside the urban area and designated villages."***

Currently, in many areas of rural Ottawa, we can't even meet the minimum 30% forest cover needed for "marginally functional ecosystems" (ECO Report, 2018), let alone the recommended 40 or 50%. While the Marlborough Forest has 82% forest cover within its boundaries, a similar-sized adjacent area, bounded by the 416 and Roger Stevens Drive, has a mere 22%. Large portions of rural Ottawa do not have enough trees to sustain their ecosystems or protect water health. This has an impact on the whole region.

As you know, forest cover reduces the frequency of extreme floods. It reduces the runoff of soil and agricultural chemicals. It helps maintain healthy groundwater aquifers. It cleans the air and sequesters carbon. Of course, there is also value in the direct benefits of woodlands: providing timber, firewood, syrup, and a place to enjoy nature.

The largest contributors to deforestation in Ottawa are agriculture and development. Economic factors are important and complex. We need to realize that healthy rural forests are vital for cities. The ecosystem services provided by forests and natural wetlands can outweigh the profit that could be made by farming the same lands. Unfortunately, our tax and incentive programs do not address this.

Land is expensive in Ontario, and many landowners want to maximize their financial gain. There is, in most cases, little to no financial benefit to the landowner for planting trees or maintaining forests, but there is an immense environmental and health benefit to all in the region. Compensating farmers and other landowners for maintaining forests on their property is good public policy. Offering tax reductions, carbon credits, grants or other resources could help encourage retention of forests and hedgerows.

We are suggesting two solutions that can have measurable results:

1. Reduce the tax ratio on forested land.

Current tax ratios favour farming over forests by taxing agricultural land at a lesser rate than managed forest land. Forests that are not part of the Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program (MFTIP) are taxed at a rate five times that of agricultural land. The administrative burden of the MFTIP in Ontario is a disincentive to many. The City should consider adjusting the tax schedule for all managed forests and mature or significant forests to a rate that is equivalent or below that of agricultural land to encourage retention of mature forests. We suggest a tax ratio of 0.1.

2) Preserve and plant hedgerows, or windbreaks, along roadways to reduce the risk of wind-blown snow white-outs.

In 2022, Ottawa's Public Works had a budget of \$977,000 for snow fences. This included wood slat snow fences as well as corn row fences. Instead of paying farmers to leave rows of corn, they could be paid a similar amount to allow the city to plant a windbreak to act as a living snow fence. This makes good sense financially and environmentally as not only would these hedgerows act as snow fences, they would provide wildlife and pollinator habitat, sequester carbon, reduce soil erosion as well as spring flooding, and improve roadside aesthetics. The city would also benefit with reduced snow removal and salting costs. In some cases, the City could re-establish hedgerows in the road allowance it already has. Researchers at the University of Alberta have determined that hedgerows store three times more carbon than the neighbouring fields of grain crops. Living snow fences can be part of a climate solution for Ottawa.

These two actions would help address multiple issues. They would fit into point 6 of the 8 priority actions in the Climate Change Master Plan "Explore carbon sequestration methods and the role of green infrastructure", which is currently not started /off track. As well they may also fit into point 7 "Encourage community action through education, incentives, support and advocacy to senior levels of government". These ideas are tangible actions that could be part of the Climate Resiliency Strategy.

Private landowners today have insufficient economic incentives to plant or keep forests on their land. In Southern and Eastern Ontario the majority of land, including approximately 80% of the forested land, is privately owned and not only are the forests underutilized, they are in fact disappearing altogether. Forests are a public good, and individuals who provide and maintain that public good should be compensated for doing so.

We need to establish some baseline information for management. If Ottawa wishes to preserve its forests in line with its stated objectives, we must be able to measure and report on how we are doing. Rural Woodlands Ottawa would like to help develop standards for monitoring the state of our forests.

We are serious about providing a voice for the rural woodlands in Ottawa. We would like to encourage you to help us get the topic of Ottawa's rural woodlands onto the City's workplans and to get these two initial actions implemented.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Andrea Sissons, Rural Woodlands Ottawa

Jean Saint-Pierre, Boisés Est

Alice Irene Whittaker, Ecology Ottawa

Paul Johanis, Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital

Sam Hersh, Horizon Ottawa

Ole Hendrickson, Sierra Club Canada Foundation

CC: Councillor George Darouze – Chair Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee (ARAC)

Councillor David Brown - ARAC

Councillor Clarke Kelly - ARAC

Councillor Catherine Kitts- ARAC

Councillor Matt Luloff - ARAC

Councillor Shawn Menard – Chair Environment and Climate Change Committee

Councillor Jeff Leiper – Chair Planning and Housing Committee

Additional Questions

What about tree planting?

One way to mitigate deforestation is to plant trees. However young trees absorb and store less carbon than mature trees, so the best way to mitigate climate change is to leave forests undisturbed. A mature, diverse forest provides greater eco-services (i.e., seed and pollen sources, healthy soils, water purification, flood control and biodiversity). Planting trees is necessary, but stopping deforestation before it happens should be a priority.

Let us take you through a hypothetical calculation of what is happening to Ottawa's trees, illustrating how replanting of trees might fit in. GIS gives the big picture. Between 2010 and 2021 approximately 4000 hectares (10,000 acres) of Ottawa woodland were removed. In 2021 alone the net loss was 540 hectares (1334 acres) - that amounts to a lot of trees. We do not have counts of tree density in Ottawa's woodlands. Density varies a great deal depending on the size of trees and mix of species. Very old, mature woodland with large trees might have several hundred trees per hectare, while plantations and younger woodlots could have thousands. Taking an estimate of 1000 trees per hectare for a typical Ottawa location, that would mean that from 2010 to 2021 Ottawa could have lost about 1/3 million trees every year, while in 2021 that would be over half a million. Comparing that to replanting we have to remember that not all planted trees survive to a mature size. So, if 100,000 trees are planted in a year, if we are lucky, maybe we could hope that 50,000 of those will mature. We have done the math. These estimations suggest that replanting might only absorb about 10% of the losses. The City is steadily falling behind on its tree canopy objective.

What about the Tree Protection By-Law?

We support the Tree Protection By-Law which is a useful way to help look after trees in urban areas. After all, in the settled communities, a large tree, even one on private property, can be important to many people. It can provide shade, protection from wind, reduction of temperature extremes, and natural beauty far beyond the property where it is found.

Outside the urban area trees are an entirely different matter. Responsibility for those trees, including clean-up after storm damage, is vested in the landowner. Insurance doesn't help. The owners of rural forests, which provide great benefit to the larger community, have little financial incentives available to retain those forests. These trees sequester carbon, fight pollution, reduce the risk of flooding, and increase biodiversity. The City needs these rural trees, which are much more important in quantity than the urban trees, but it currently does little to help.

We believe Ottawa needs to think of its entire forest. Rural woodlands are being neglected in City policy.

Who are we?

Rural Woodlands Ottawa is a volunteer group dedicated to preserving healthy woodlands in a diverse landscape with woodlots, wetlands, hedgerows and natural open areas. We work with other organizations and the City of Ottawa to raise public awareness and take action to protect our priceless rural woodland heritage. We are exploring the idea of affiliation with other like-minded groups throughout Ontario.

Boisés Est is a francophone woodlot owners association created in 1998 to encourage the sustainable use of forests in accordance with social, economic and environmental best practices. We achieve this by promoting a balanced management of woodlots of its members as well as increasing the importance of forests with the public. We deliver about 10 workshops and information sessions yearly to our 200+ members and interested citizens. www.boisesest.ca

Ecology Ottawa is a not-for-profit, grassroots and volunteer-driven organization working to make Ottawa the green capital of Canada. We provide residents with the information and tools they need to understand local environmental issues and promote environmental leadership at city hall.

The Greenspace Alliance works with community organizations and individuals to preserve and enhance natural areas in the National Capital area, including public and private green spaces, wetlands and waterways. Concerned residents formed the Alliance in October 1997. An important part of our work involves engaging with all levels of government and other stakeholders. We believe that greenspace is essential for a community's quality of life, contributing to our personal, social, economic, cultural and spiritual well-being, as well as mitigating climate change while also helping us adapt to it.

Horizon Ottawa is a municipal-focused grassroots organization dedicated to creating a city that genuinely works for everyone with close to 900 members across the City of Ottawa. Horizon Ottawa's mission is to cultivate local solidarity around socially and economically progressive priorities so that Ottawa can become a city where everyone can thrive.

Sierra Club Canada Foundation supports these proposals from Rural Woodlands Ottawa, which align with our mission of empowering people to be leaders in protecting, restoring and enjoying healthy and safe ecosystems.