

Media Release - For Immediate Release

Conservation group applauds Ontario government's landmark Boreal forest announcement

Toronto, July 14, 2008 - Ontario Nature applauds today's landmark announcement by the Ontario government to implement measures to protect the province's northern boreal region. The announcement delivers on important election promises and will result in the protection of at least 50 percent of this region from industrial development.

This announcement includes key elements, including: the initiation of land use planning across the entire region; a threshold of 50 percent of the region to be safeguarded from industrial development; consultation with First Nations and accommodation of their interests prior to any new forestry or mining projects proceeding; and the reform of Ontario's antiquated Mining Act.

"I am thrilled by the Premier's announcement," says Caroline Schultz, Executive Director of Ontario Nature, Ontario's largest not-for-profit conservation organization. "This is the biggest protected areas announcement in the province's history. Once these areas are set aside, Ontario's protected area will virtually triple."

The size of the area to be protected is approximately 225,000 square kilometres, which is more than 20 percent of the total land base of the entire province. Put another way, the protected area will be roughly the same size as the United Kingdom.

"This decision is unprecedented in Canada," adds Schultz. "The government has seized a unique opportunity to protect a vast and largely intact landscape that provides innumerable benefits to local communities and society at large, clearly demonstrating its dedication to sustaining the province's natural heritage for generations to come."

Decisions regarding which areas to protect from industrial development will be based on sound land-use planning across the region. The land-use planning process will allow for the full involvement of First Nations communities and consultations with stakeholders. Until land-use planning has been completed, no new logging or mining projects will be allowed to proceed in the region.

"We're very pleased that the Premier is putting further industrial development on hold until all values and interests have been identified and weighed," says Schultz. "Mineral exploration and development have been proceeding at an alarming rate in northern Ontario, with no consideration given to environmental, cultural or health impacts. The reform of Ontario's antiquated Mining Act represents an important opportunity to address these shortcomings."

Ontario Nature looks forward to working with this government to ensure that the minimum 50 percent threshold is met and that it includes critical habitat for endangered and declining species such as the woodland caribou, which is dependent on an intact boreal forest.

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Backgrounder

Protection for the boreal region

The Ontario Mining Act was passed in 1873 and enshrines the right of “free entry.” Free entry allows prospectors to access most of Ontario’s land mass and the power to stake claims and undertake exploration on private and Crown land, without consulting property owners or the public. Prospectors are not under any obligation to consult with First Nations communities and mining projects are not subjected to overall environmental assessments.

North America’s boreal forest is more than 5 million square kilometres in size and stretches from Newfoundland to Alaska. This vast forest represents one-quarter of the earth’s surviving original forest, 750,000 square kilometres of which are in Ontario. The boreal ecosystem is a haven for billions of migratory birds and for the continent’s largest populations of winter-adapted mammals: wolves, caribou, wolverines, lynx and moose.

In 2003, Premier Dalton McGuinty pledged to “institute broad-scale land-use planning for Ontario’s northern boreal forest before any new major development” is permitted. At present, only 5 percent of the northern boreal forest is protected in Ontario. Pending today’s announcement, the Premier’s election promise will be fulfilled, and protection will increase significantly.

Ontario Nature is a not-for profit that works to protect and restore natural habitats through research, education and conservation. It connects thousands of individuals and communities with nature through various conservation groups across the province (charitable registration #10737 8952 RR0001). For more information, visit www.ontarionature.org.