

GREENBELT FOUNDATION

Response to ERO number 025-0380

**Proposed interim changes to the *Endangered Species Act, 2007*
and a proposal for the Species Conservation Act, 2025**

Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks



Possibility grows here.

Submitted: May 16, 2025

Edward McDonnell, Chief Executive Officer
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Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks
Species at Risk Branch
40 St Clair Ave West
Toronto, ON M4V 1M2

Re: Bill 5 – Proposed interim changes to the *Endangered Species Act, 2007* and a proposal for the *Species Conservation Act, 2025*

Dear Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks staff,

The Greenbelt Foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on ERO posting #025-0380 regarding the above referenced proposed legislation. We have serious concerns about the impact of this legislation on Species At Risk (SAR) and the resulting implications for the government's ability to maintain the essential link between healthy environments, strong economies, and resilient communities, which directly rely on critical ecosystem services such as clean water and air, food production, nature-based tourism and flood protection.

We also note that Schedule 9 of Bill 5, the Special Economic Zones Act, 2025, also has implications for SAR. Through a separate submission, we provide feedback on Schedule 9 of Bill 5 in response to ERO posting #025-0391.

We acknowledge the government's urgency in strengthening Ontario's economy and addressing the impacts of international tariffs. However, these goals can and should be pursued in a way that safeguards species and their habitats as well as larger natural heritage and water resource systems. We urge the government to recognize that key sectors of Ontario's economy, including agriculture and agri-food and outdoor recreation, fundamentally depend on the health and integrity of such systems.

As you know, the Greenbelt exemplifies how natural systems and biodiversity contribute to prosperous and healthy communities. Its two million acres of protected agricultural, water resources and natural heritage systems provide natural resources and a reliable food source while supporting economic growth and safeguarding communities through the provisions of clean air, fresh water, climate resilience. The Greenbelt also supports some of the highest concentrations of biodiversity in Canada, including habitats critical to the survival of many SAR. The overall health of the Greenbelt and its ecosystems is fundamental to its ability to provide critical ecological functions, which are threatened by the loss and fragmentation of natural cover and species diversity.

Within the Greenbelt and across Ontario, a systems approach is in place to protect ecosystems. The proposed legislation would significantly weaken this approach, placing the integrity of ecological systems – on which all Ontarians depend - at risk. We ask the government to:

- Provide assurance that Greenbelt policies for protecting SAR and their habitats will be upheld and maintained. The Greenbelt Foundation research indicates that the number of SAR in the Greenbelt has doubled since 2005 suggesting its importance as a refuge in the region.
- Pause advancement of this bill to allow for meaningful public discussion and the development of alternative policy solutions that will benefit species, ecosystems, communities, and the economy. Key considerations are presented in this submission.

Greenbelt policies protect species at risk

Greenbelt policies provide permanent protection to systems of natural heritage and water resources that support ecosystem health, including SAR:

- Protecting SAR is part of the Greenbelt Plan's goals for the Protected Countryside.
- The habitat of endangered species and threatened species is listed as a key natural heritage feature.
- The Greenbelt Plan directs new mineral aggregate operation, wayside pits or quarries away from the habitat of endangered and threatened species.
- The Greenbelt Plan's definition of habitat is the same science-based definition as currently written in the *Endangered Species Act, 2007* and includes the area prescribed by the regulation and areas on which the species depends for food, reproduction, etc.

Recent research has shown that there are over 144 SAR in the Greenbelt, and that there is a high concentration of SAR directly adjacent to built up areas in the Greenbelt. The Greenbelt provides refuge for species that are displaced by human and other pressures. Maintaining protections for SAR is critical for biodiversity conservation throughout the Greenbelt but particularly near settlement areas where development pressures are greater. Further, effectively maintaining protections for SAR habitat outside of the Greenbelt preserves the connectivity of natural systems that serve as corridors for species movement into and throughout the Greenbelt.

SAR make up an important part of Ontario's uniquely important biodiversity and the natural heritage system of the Greenbelt. Higher levels of biodiversity make ecosystems, related economies and communities healthier, more stable, and more resilient. Protecting, conserving and restoring Ontario's biodiversity is vital for people because it:

- Supports productive farmland that provides food and jobs.
- Creates opportunities for outdoor recreation and exercise.
- Promotes human health by providing clean air and water.
- Protects humans, animals and plants from disease, like avian flu.
- Protects people, houses, and infrastructure from the impacts of climate change and extreme weather, like flooding and severe storms.

Key Concerns

Given the above context and considerations, we have serious concerns that this proposed legislation would significantly weaken protections for SAR, and the overall health and biodiversity of ecological systems, upon which key Ontario economies depend.

Compared to existing the existing policy and legislative regime, the proposed changes narrow the definition of habitat, removes the purpose of protection and recovery of SAR, moves away from science-based decisions about species' listing, and replaces the permitting system with voluntary registration for activities that would harm a SAR or its habitat. These changes represent a major departure from existing policy and therefore require greater discussion of alternative solutions.

Further discussions should focus on the following considerations:

- **The government should maintain the spirit and intent of the current *Endangered Species Act, 2007***, for species protection, recovery, and permitting. This is essential to ensure Ontario continues to support a high level of biodiversity which underpins the quality of life of all Ontarians.
- **The proposed Species Conservation Act should maintain the same definition of 'habitat'** as outlined in the *Endangered Species Act, 2007*. Should the ministry consider a revised definition, we strongly encourage that it be grounded in science.
- **Decisions about species listing should be firmly based on scientific evidence** and guided by the advice of a diverse group of experts.
- **The existing permitting system should be improved to streamline and simplify the approvals process** while maintaining protections for biodiversity. We caution that changes to the permitting system could create uncertainty and confusion that may erode public trust in good stewards, such as farmers.

Conclusion

Thank you for consideration of this submission. We welcome and strongly encourage further engagement on these matters.

Sincerely,



Edward McDonnell
Chief Executive Officer