

## EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

### Chapter 3 – Section 1. NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

#### SUMMARY

The natural environment work program (“NEWP”) is a critical part of the Niagara Official Plan (“NOP”). The NEWP is focused on establishing a regional-scale **natural heritage system** (NHS) and **water resource system** (WRS), including policies and mapping. The NHS and WRS are ecologically linked, rely on and support each other, and have many overlapping components. **Together these systems collectively form the integrated Natural Environment System (“NES”).**

A range of options for the NES were identified, consulted on, and evaluated. From these, Option 3B (NHS Option 3B + the single WRS option) is the recommended NES option.

Consultation on the NEWP has included 2 major points of engagement totaling nearly **130 individual points** of engagement to date, with many future engagement sessions planned. A 3<sup>rd</sup> POE has been planned after the complete set of draft policies and mapping is prepared.

The attached ‘*Natural Environment Work Program Status Update & Recommendations Report*’ (April 2021) [**Appendix 6.2**] provides a detailed overview of the work completed to date, including an overview and discussion of the revised NES options, an overview of the preliminary policy intent for the NES, the recommendation for the preferred option, next steps, implications, and timelines.

Regardless of the NES option selected and implemented, environmental planning will change for the better: in terms of the total coverage of the NES in the Region and the level of protection provided to some features in the system. These changes are required to meet provincial conformity.

Further, regardless of the NES option selected by Regional Council, there will be a range of improvements in environmental planning in the Region to address known gaps, including significantly improved final mapping and better alignment with the regulations and land use policies of the NPCA.

Integration Guide for Sub-sections Reported in PDS 17-2021	
<input type="checkbox"/> Regional Structure	<input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Housing	<input type="checkbox"/> Employment
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Land Needs	<input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SABR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Aggregates
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Transportation	<input type="checkbox"/> Natural Heritage incl.
<input type="checkbox"/> Infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/> Water Systems Options



Integration Guide for Sub-sections Reported in PDS 17-2021			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	District/Secondary Plans	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Watershed Planning
<input type="checkbox"/>	Urban Design	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Climate Change

## **OVERVIEW**

On July 15, 2020, PDS 26-2020 was presented to the Region's Planning and Economic Development Committee (PEDC). This report presented options for the NHS and WRS. It also directed staff to initiate the 2<sup>nd</sup> Point of Engagement (POE) for the NEWP with the public and other stakeholders.

Through the 2<sup>nd</sup> POE it became clear that Regional Council, local municipalities, and other stakeholders wanted additional details on each of the NES options, including the spatial extent of each NES option, to assist with making a decision on the preferred option.

Regional Planning staff, with the support of the consultant team, have worked hard to be in a position where **all of the additional mapping requested by members of Regional Council and other stakeholders has been prepared**. This information includes 135 new maps and 81 new tables of data, representing all 27 urban areas in the Region. The mapping and supporting data has been shared with the local municipalities, the public, and other stakeholders to allow options to be more easily compared. The mapping for a selected option will be refined for accuracy in accordance with the system methodology and in consultation with local municipalities.

To meet the 2022 Provincial deadline for conformity of the NOP, it is critical that Regional Council make a decision on the preferred NES option. Planning Staff, with the support of the consultant team, need sufficient time to complete the detailed mapping process based on the selected option, and to undertake the 3<sup>rd</sup> POE.

Growth is coming to the Region, the sooner the new NES and NOP can be approved and implemented, the sooner growth can be better managed, known limitations of the existing Core NHS can be addressed, and important natural features and areas can be better protected.

NES option 3B (NHS option 3B + the single WRS option) is recommended as the preferred NES option. In making this recommendation it should be noted that all options are in conformance with Provincial requirements, and could be fully designed and implemented by Regional Planning Staff through the NOP. NES option 3B:

- **Exceeds the required provincial standards** for the identification of features and systems which in the long-term will support a more resilient and biodiverse NES.
- **Ensures that there is not a reduction in the area of treed vegetation communities** included within the Region's NES.
- **Support other objectives, such as helping mitigate the impacts of climate change.**
- Provides a balanced approach for the protection of the natural environment by **increasing the number of components and features outside of settlement areas** and limiting additional constraints to development in settlement areas. This option works from both an ecological and land-use planning perspective.
- Provides **flexibility for local municipalities to plan for local needs** and priorities in their communities. Local municipalities would not be prevented from going beyond the Regional system, either through their Local Official Plans or Secondary Plans. Regional Planning Staff are available to provide support for those exercises should they be desired by local municipalities.
- Option 3B **considers the significant public input received** through the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Points of Engagement. Through the 2<sup>nd</sup> Point of Engagement, **it was clear that there was no consensus** on which NES Option was most desirable. This speaks to the **need for a balance between the Options.**