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INSPIRING CHANGE



January 17, 2014

The Honourable Leona Aglukkaq
Minister of the Environment
Environment Canada
10 Wellington Street, 28th Floor
Gatineau, Quebec, K1A 0H3

Dear Minister Aglukkaq:

Re: Recommendations for the national Rouge Park Strategic Plan and Legislation

On behalf of Environmental Defence, Ontario Nature and Friends of the Rouge Watershed we would like to bring to your attention several outstanding concerns with regard to the creation of the national Rouge Park, and to respectfully offer recommendations for addressing these concerns. As charitable environmental organizations, we strive to uphold the broad public interest in protecting and enhancing human and ecosystem health, and represent many thousands of Canadians with a specific interest in ensuring the long-term health and sustainability of the national Rouge Park.

Your government has taken a commendable step to create a national Rouge Park in the Greater Toronto Area, seeking to offer many benefits to Canadians including the protection and restoration of an important element of Canada's most biologically diverse, threatened and under-protected life zone – the Carolinian forest. This park will connect urban dwellers in the most heavily populated region of Canada to the national park system, protect and restore vital ecosystem services that support watershed and community health and long term prosperity, and protect areas for healthy local food production.

To achieve these benefits, however, the park strategic plan needs to be consistent with the vision, environmental policies and conservation science framework of the existing Rouge Park, Greenbelt, Oak Ridges Moraine and Great Lakes Water Quality Improvement Plans. Over the last 24 years, a significant investment of public resources and community involvement has resulted in the creation of sound plans for the protection of Rouge Park in particular. It is essential to uphold and strengthen this significant public investment.

We respectfully ask that the seven recommendations below be reflected in the strategic plan and legislation being drafted by your government for the national Rouge Park:

- 1. Strengthen and implement the existing environmental protection policy framework;**
- 2. Adopt the longstanding Rouge Park vision, goal and objectives;**
- 3. Create a healthy and sustainable 100 km² national Rouge Park;**

4. **Act to restore a sustainable and integrated natural heritage system;**
5. **Transition to agricultural practices which improve the park's ecological health, public access and local food production;**
6. **Choose a more appropriate name for this near-urban national park; and**
7. **Create a multi-stakeholder park advisory committee.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Strengthen and implement the existing environmental protection policy framework

The national Rouge Park strategic plan should strengthen and implement the environmental protection and restoration policies of the following plans and policies, created with decades of intensive public and stakeholder consultation and planning by all levels of government: Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and Toronto Remedial Action Plan; Rouge Park Management Plan (1994); Rouge North Management Plan (2001); Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan (2002); Greenbelt Plan (2005); Rouge River Watershed Plan (2007); Little Rouge Corridor Management Plan (2007); and Rouge Park Natural Heritage Action Plan (2008). Special attention should be given to the entire Rouge River watershed, both within and upstream of the park, to protect and improve water quality, stream-flow stability and biological diversity.

Recommendation 2: Adopt the longstanding Rouge Park vision, goal and objectives

The existing Rouge Park vision, goal and objectives are the product of decades of intensive public, stakeholder and government consultation and should be adopted within the strategic plan and legislation for the national Rouge Park. The vision in the 1994 Rouge Park Management Plan states:

"The Rouge Park will be a special place of outstanding natural features and diverse cultural heritage in an urban-rural setting, protected and flourishing as an ecosystem in perpetuity. Human activities will exist in harmony with the natural values of the park. The park will be a sanctuary for nature and the human spirit. ... The primary focus of the vision centres on the protection and appreciation of the park ecosystem."

The longstanding Rouge Park vision and objectives are consistent with Parks Canada's mandate, federal responsibilities under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, and federal and provincial commitments regarding biodiversity and endangered species.

Recommendation 3: Create a Healthy and Sustainable 100 km² national Rouge Park

More than 100 km² of public land surrounds the Rouge River and Duffins Creek and this land is predominantly designated Provincial Greenbelt Plan "natural heritage system." The ancestral home of Mississauga, Huron Wendat and other First Nations, this land is situated within the most heavily populated and developed region of Canada. It represents a unique and invaluable opportunity to preserve an important element of Canada's natural, cultural and agricultural history. Given this context and the growth projections in the region, we urge you to protect at least 100 km² of public land within the national Rouge Park. This would still leave a Pickering Airport study area of approximately 22 km² which is much larger than the existing Toronto Pearson International Airport.

Recommendation 4: Act to Restore a Sustainable and Integrated Natural Heritage System

The national Rouge Park Strategic Plan should include a commitment to protect and restore the quantity, quality and distribution of natural cover within the park and watershed so that it meets or preferably exceeds the federal recommendations set out in Environment Canada's *How Much Habitat is Enough*. Specifically, Environment Canada recommends more than 30% forest cover and 10% wetland cover for viable wildlife populations and watershed health. With only 12% forest cover and 1% wetland cover, the Rouge watershed falls far below the recommended standard.

Ecological restoration will be necessary to protect and improve Rouge Park's biological diversity, water quality, stream base flow, carrying capacity, resilience and visitor enjoyment. For existing Rouge Park lands, the strategic plan should support the timely restoration of the ecological corridors and natural heritage system identified in the Rouge Park Management Plan (1994), the Rouge North Management Plan (2001), the Greenbelt Plan (2005), the Little Rouge Corridor Management Plan (2007) and the Rouge Natural Heritage Action Plan (2008). For the federal lands being added to create a national Rouge Park, the strategic plan should require a conservation science-based planning process which maps and guides the implementation of a sustainable natural heritage system linking the existing Rouge Park lands with the Oak Ridges Moraine and adjacent watersheds.

Recommendation 5: Transition to agricultural practices which improve the park's ecological health, public access and local food production

Rouge Park will be unique in its integration of nature and agriculture, both of which it seeks to protect in the face of a growing population and development pressures. It offers an exceptional opportunity to celebrate heritage farms and farmers and to encourage and showcase ecological approaches to farming. The federal government and Parks Canada should work with all stakeholders to ensure that agricultural operations in the park transition towards ecologically sound farming practices and local food production, to protect water quality and biological diversity and benefit local farmers, park visitors and surrounding residents.

Recommendation 6: Choose a more appropriate name for this near-urban national park

Parks Canada's desire to create a new category of "urban" national park should not result in the imposition of an inappropriate new name for Rouge Park. The name "Rouge Park" with the long-standing motto "Wild in the City" are true to both the history and the vision of this park and convey the important wildland values which the public wants Rouge Park to protect, restore and share. We strongly recommend that these terms be used rather than "Urban" or "People's Park."

Recommendation 7: Create a Multi-Stakeholder Park Advisory Committee

In May 2012, then Environment Minister, Peter Kent, promised to create an Interim Park Advisory Board, presumably to fill the vacuum left by the disbanded multi-stakeholder Rouge Park Alliance. We recommend that you proceed with the creation of this committee, which should include stakeholders such as Friends of the Rouge Watershed. This park advisory committee should meet regularly to help inform and influence the creation and implementation of the park strategic plan and legislation.

Conclusion

In closing we would like to thank you for your commitment to establishing the national Rouge Park, an action that stands to benefit millions of Canadians. We urge you to create legislation and a strategic plan for the national Rouge Park which incorporate the recommendations above.

We hope that you will seize this unique opportunity to create a visionary and widely-acclaimed national Rouge Park legacy.

On behalf of thousands of concerned Canadians, we look forward to your response.



Tim Gray
Executive Director
Environmental Defence



Caroline Schultz
Executive Director
Ontario Nature



Jim Robb
General Manager
Friends of the Rouge Watershed

cc:

The Honourable Jim Flaherty, PC, MP
The Honourable Lisa Raitt, PC, MP
The Honourable John McKay, PC, MP
The Honourable Peter Kent, PC, MP
MP Jim Karygiannis, Scarborough Agincourt
MP John McCallum, Markham Unionville
MP Colin Carrie, Oshawa
MP Paul Calandra, Oak Ridges Markham
MP Megan Leslie, NDP Environment Critic
MP Chris Alexander, Ajax Pickering
MP Corneliu Chisu, Pickering Scarborough East
MP Dan Harris, Scarborough Southwest
MP Roxanne James, Scarborough Centre
MP Rathika Sitsabaiesan, Scarborough Rouge River
Mr. Alan Latourelle, CEO Parks Canada
Ms. Pam Veinotte, Park Superintendent