

American Water Willow

Ontario Government Response Statement



Photo: Rob Tervo

PROTECTING AND RECOVERING SPECIES AT RISK IN ONTARIO

Species at risk recovery is a key part of protecting Ontario's biodiversity. Biodiversity – the variety of living organisms on Earth – provides us with clean air and water, food, fibre, medicine and other resources that we need to survive.

The *Endangered Species Act, 2007* (ESA) is the Government of Ontario's legislative commitment to protecting and recovering species at risk and their habitats. As soon as a species is listed as extirpated, endangered or threatened under the ESA, it is automatically protected from harm or harassment. Also, immediately upon listing, the habitats of endangered and threatened species are protected from damage or destruction.

Under the ESA, the Ministry of Natural Resources (the Ministry) must ensure that a recovery strategy is prepared for each species that is listed as endangered or threatened. A recovery strategy provides science-based advice to government on what is required to achieve recovery of a species.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE STATEMENTS

Within nine months after a recovery strategy is prepared, the ESA requires the Ministry to publish a statement summarizing the government's intended actions and priorities in response to the recovery strategy. The recovery strategy for American Water-willow (*Justicia americana*) was completed on January 11, 2013 (http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/stdprodconsume/groups/lr/@mnr/@species/documents/document/stdprod_099153.pdf).

The response statement is the government's policy response to the scientific advice provided in the recovery strategy. All recommendations provided in the recovery strategy were considered and this response statement identifies those that are considered to be appropriate and necessary for the protection and recovery of the species. In addition to the strategy, the response statement is based on input from stakeholders, other jurisdictions, Aboriginal communities and members of the public. It reflects the best available traditional, local and scientific knowledge at this time and may be adapted if new information becomes available. In implementing the actions in the response statement, the ESA allows the Ministry to determine what is feasible, taking into account social and economic factors.

American Water-willow is an aquatic perennial plant that grows in colonies. The plant has a stem that can reach a height of 20 cm to 1 m, with long and narrow leaves, and it produces white or pale violet tube-shaped flowers.

MOVING FORWARD TO PROTECT AND RECOVER AMERICAN WATER-WILLOW

American Water-willow is listed as a threatened species under the ESA. The ESA prohibits harm or harassment of the species and damage or destruction of its habitat without authorization. Authorization would require that conditions established by the Ministry be met.

American Water-willow's global range extends from the American south and Midwest to Ontario and Quebec, and it has been assessed as globally secure. This plant has not been found to be common in Canada, where the existing sites represent less than five per cent of the global population and are separated from the main distribution in the U.S. Historic records indicate there were once 17 occurrences in Ontario, and 11 in Quebec. Currently, there are a total of seven confirmed occurrences in Ontario, which are found in Essex County, the Niagara Region, and in the Thousand Islands area. Population trends at these sites are largely unknown; however, stem counts indicate the possibility of a recent decline at Point Pelee National Park. There are also three known occurrences in Quebec, of which one population is believed to account for 99 per cent of all known stems counted in Canada.

American Water-willow is an aquatic plant that usually grows along the shores of rivers, streams, and lakes. Its distribution may be limited by climate, dispersal mechanisms and pollution, including the acidification of lakes. American Water-willow can propagate through both vegetative and sexual reproduction, and population fluctuations are thought to be normal. In Ontario, the number of stems has fluctuated from one year to the next however the extent of this natural variability is not known. In addition, the effects of flooding and drought – which can occur at its current locations – are not fully understood, but some research suggests American Water-willow populations can be negatively impacted by natural changes in water regimes. Major threats to the species' recovery include changes in water levels due to natural and anthropogenic causes, loss of habitat through erosion and infilling, competition from invasive plants, and trampling.

The government's goal for the recovery of American Water-willow is to maintain the current population levels at existing locations and, if possible, enable increases.

Protecting and recovering species at risk is a shared responsibility. No single agency or organization has the knowledge, authority or financial resources to protect and recover all of Ontario's species at risk. Successful recovery requires inter-governmental co-operation and the involvement of many individuals, organizations and communities.

In developing the government response statement, the Ministry considered what actions are feasible for the government to lead directly and what actions are feasible for the government to support its conservation partners to undertake.

GOVERNMENT-LED ACTIONS

To help protect and recover American Water-willow, the government will directly undertake the following actions:

- Conduct surveys for American Water-willow at historical locations in provincial parks and if found protect and maintain suitable habitat.
- Educate other agencies and authorities involved in planning and environmental assessment processes on the protection requirements under the ESA.
- Encourage the submission of American Water-willow data to the Ministry's central repository at the Natural Heritage Information Centre.
- Undertake communications and outreach to increase public awareness of species at risk in Ontario.
- Protect American Water-willow and its habitat through the ESA.
- Support conservation, agency, municipal and industry partners, and Aboriginal communities and organizations to undertake activities to protect and recover American Water-willow. Support will be provided through funding, agreements, permits (including conditions) and advisory services.
- Establish and communicate annual priority actions for government support in order to encourage collaboration and reduce duplication of efforts.

GOVERNMENT-SUPPORTED ACTIONS

The government endorses the following actions as being necessary for the protection and recovery of American Water-willow. Actions identified as "high" will be given priority consideration for funding or for authorizations under the ESA. The government will focus its support on these high-priority actions over the next five years.

- Focus Area:** **Monitoring**
- Objective:** Enhance knowledge of American Water-willow distribution and abundance in Ontario.
- Actions:**
1. **(HIGH)** Monitor population abundance, demographics, habitat conditions and threats at existing sites.
 2. Conduct standardized surveys of suitable habitat and historic sites to try to detect new populations within the species' current range.

Focus Area:	Research
Objective:	Determine the natural range of variability in American Water-willow populations and preferred habitat conditions.
	Actions:
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. (HIGH) Characterize American Water-willow habitat and micro-habitat conditions, including the conditions required for the maintenance and growth of American Water-willow populations in Ontario. Collaborate with experts in other jurisdictions (e.g. Quebec) as appropriate. 4. Investigate the extent of variation in American Water-willow populations to determine the level of natural population fluctuations in Ontario. 5. Assess the appropriateness and feasibility of re-establishing populations at historical locations in protected areas. This evaluation should be undertaken in coordination with required approval processes.
Focus Area:	Management
Objective:	Engage local stakeholders in habitat stewardship to benefit American Water-willow.
	Actions:
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. (HIGH) Maintain habitat quality by minimizing or mitigating the impacts caused by fluctuating water quantities (e.g. due to dam operations). 7. Implement best management practices (BMPs) for the control of invasive species, such as the Ministry’s BMPs for the control of European Common Reed in American Water-willow habitat.

IMPLEMENTING ACTIONS

Financial support for the implementation of actions may be available through the Species at Risk Stewardship Fund, Species at Risk Research Fund for Ontario, or the Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program. Conservation partners are encouraged to discuss project proposals related to the actions in this response statement with the Ministry. The Ministry can also advise if any authorizations under the ESA or other legislation may be required to undertake the project.

Implementation of the actions may be subject to changing priorities across the multitude of species at risk, available resources and the capacity of partners to undertake recovery activities. Where appropriate, the implementation of actions for multiple species will be co-ordinated across government response statements.

REVIEWING PROGRESS

The ESA requires the Ministry to conduct a review of progress towards protecting and recovering a species not later than five years from the publication of this response statement. The review will help identify if adjustments are needed to achieve the protection and recovery of the American Water-willow.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank all those who participated in the development of the “Recovery Strategy for the American Water-willow (*Justicia Americana*) in Canada” for their dedication to protecting and recovering species at risk.

For additional information:

Visit the species at risk website at ontario.ca/speciesatrisk

Contact your MNR district office

Contact the Natural Resources Information Centre

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