

# Cherry Birch

## Ontario Government Response Statement



Photo: Lynk Media

### 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 Cherry Birch (*Betula lenta*) was completed on January 11, 2013 ([http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/stdprodconsume/groups/lr/@mnr/@species/documents/document/stdprod\\_075574.pdf](http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/stdprodconsume/groups/lr/@mnr/@species/documents/document/stdprod_075574.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.

Cherry Birch is a deciduous tree that reaches up to 25 m in height and 95 cm in diameter, and can live 200 years or more. Its bark is reddish-brown or nearly black in younger trees, becoming light grayish brown with age. The only known natural population in Canada occurs in Ontario's Niagara Region along forested slopes near the Lake Ontario shoreline.

## MOVING FORWARD TO PROTECT AND RECOVER CHERRY BIRCH

Cherry Birch is listed as an endangered 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.

Cherry Birch is widespread in the northeastern United States and has not been found to be common in Ontario. Records of the only Canadian population in Ontario's Niagara region indicate a decline from approximately 50 to 65 trees during the last 45 years to only 14 observed in 2005. This decline is attributed to residential development and shoreline erosion, which may be exacerbated by historical land clearing for agriculture. Cherry Birch often grows in moist, well-drained soils, and its Ontario habitat consists of clay-loam soil that is alkaline due to the presence of limestone bedrock. As of 2010, there were a total of 18 Cherry Birch trees observed at two adjacent sites west of St. Catharines. The first site consists of nine young trees that are growing along a forested slope and which appear to be healthy and producing seeds. The second site, about 400 m away, consists of a woodlot and a residential lawn on the shoreline of Lake Ontario with eight seedlings and one mature tree, all of which were planted.

Shoreline erosion, land clearing and development are thought to be responsible for much of Cherry Birch's more recent population decline in Ontario. Given the low number and isolation of the existing trees, genetic depression is also a potential threat, and it is unknown whether Cherry Birch can recover naturally. Half of the current population consists of planted seedlings on a residential lawn in an area subject to mechanical mowing, trampling, and vehicle storage which may affect their survival rate. However, transplanting these seedlings is not an appropriate recovery action due to the risk of loss. The planted seedlings on the lawn numbered 70 in 2008, but by 2010 only eight had survived. Given the limited availability of suitable habitat and to minimize the risk of loss to the existing small population of Cherry Birch in Ontario, it may be worth exploring the feasibility of collecting, propagating, and planting seeds at the existing site, where there is suitable habitat.

**The government's goal for the recovery of the Cherry Birch is to maintain the persistence of Cherry Birch at or above current population levels within its current distribution in Ontario.**

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 Cherry Birch, the government will directly undertake the following actions:

- Educate other agencies and authorities involved in planning and environmental assessment processes on the protection requirements under the ESA.
- Encourage the submission of Cherry Birch 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 Cherry Birch 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 the Cherry Birch. Support will be provided through funding, agreements, permits (including conditions) and/or 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 the Cherry Birch. 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:** Protection and Management

**Objective:** Maintain the existing population and suitable habitat.

**Actions:**

1. **(HIGH)** Work with interested partners and private landowners of existing sites to:
  - maintain natural forested habitat;
  - implement best management practices to mitigate the impacts of shoreline and soil erosion near occurrences; and
  - mitigate the impacts of herbivory by rabbits and mice.
2. Investigate the feasibility of collecting a small amount of seeds from mature Cherry Birch trees for propagation in a nursery and explore the potential of planting the seedlings at the existing site, where there is suitable habitat.

**Focus Area: Inventory and Monitoring**

**Objective:** Improve knowledge of the species demographics and survey suitable habitat.

**Actions:**

3. Monitor existing populations of Cherry Birch to:
  - assess the survival rate, health and status of saplings, seedlings, and trees; and
  - determine population size and age distribution, including new recruitment of individuals.

## 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 Cherry Birch.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank all those who participated in the development of the "Recovery Strategy for the Cherry Birch (*Betula lenta*) in Ontario" for their dedication to protecting and recovering species at risk.

### For additional information:

Visit the species at risk website at [ontario.ca/speciesatrisk](http://ontario.ca/speciesatrisk)

Contact your MNR district office

Contact the Natural Resources Information Centre

1-800-667-1940

TTY 1-866-686-6072

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