

# Sustainability in Ontario's Far North:

~~Toward a more strategic approach to addressing change in Ontario's Northern Boreal~~

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Sustainable development is striving to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1992). Achieving sustainability in Ontario's Far North requires careful consideration of how development and conservation decisions impact the long-term well-being of the environment and the people who live there. Plans to bring multiple developments and associated infrastructure projects to Ontario's Far North demand a more sophisticated and comprehensive approach to address environmental, social and economic effects than current land use planning and environmental impact assessment processes permit. There is a clear need to develop a process that successfully integrates environmental, social, and economic factors in decision-making while planning for change in the region, particularly for the Ring of Fire. A proactive approach to addressing change is fundamental to fostering both *resilience* (sustaining those attributes that are important to society in the face of change) and *adaptation* (developing new institutions and approaches that function under changed conditions). A regional Strategic Environment Assessment (R-SEA) could be an entry point to acknowledging and addressing the risks and tradeoffs of novel developments in Ontario's Far North within a holistic, cross-sectoral, participatory framework.

## What is a Regional Strategic Environmental Assessment?

An R-SEA is a decision-making support process used to promote sustainable development and integrated assessment for a particular region. Currently, project-based environmental assessment is concerned with the likely impacts of a specific project proposal and finding ways to mitigate those impacts so they are deemed acceptable. It does not ask whether the proposed project is the most appropriate form of development. It does not determine whether the cumulative environmental effects are in conflict with broader regional environmental goals or desired future conditions. In practice, land use and resource planning policies and programs in Ontario remain divorced from individual project assessment and vice versa. R-SEA works within a structured, transparent, and participatory framework, aiming to support more effective and efficient decision-making for sustainable development and improved governance. How? By providing a framework in which to consider questions, issues, and alternative visions for the future.

R-SEA is a systematic approach that is designed to ensure that environmental and other sustainability aspects are considered in policy, plan and program making at the appropriate scale. R-SEA helps integrate environment into higher-order decision-making processes so that downstream decisions on development projects (e.g., project approvals) are embedded in a broader context. Under R-SEA, sustainable development policies, programs and strategies guide future project developments, and the management and assessment of cumulative environmental effects is embedded within a regional context. Through R-SEA, environmental and social risks are identified at the earliest phases of strategic appraisal, preferably before irreversible individual development decisions are taken. Working through a range of potential outcomes and proposed solutions involving future conditions, players work together on a solution set meant to avoid, reduce, or remedy potential risks. The seminal contribution of R-SEA is

to explore alternative future scenarios and key environmental goals and objectives for a region. This discussion can inform the pace and nature of future development, including significant regional environmental thresholds, targets, and limits. It can also advance decision-making about management and assessment of cumulative environmental and social effects in a region. R-SEA is an evidence-based instrument, aiming for scientific rigour by using various assessment methods and techniques, and participatory approaches.

The general reasons for promoting R-SEA include the need to: 1) seek understanding and resolution of risks associated with multiple developments and to increase environmental sustainability in policies, plans, and programs; 2) focus and streamline project level approvals by making them more responsive to policies, plans, and programs, thereby ensuring that development actions are set within a broader environmental framework; and 3) to address the limited capacity of project specific approvals to address cumulative effects that occur beyond the scope and scale of the individual project.

### **Why should a Regional Strategic Approach be considered in Ontario's Far North?**

- There are critical (and unprecedented) social, economic, and environmental risks associated with development our northern boreal region—a landscape of global significance. Our knowledge systems and inability to predict impacts of multiple development projects that are envisioned is further challenged by the naturally dynamic nature of this ecosystem and predicted changes due to climate change.
- In view of significant development interest in this region (particularly the Ring of Fire) and the potential for irreversible impacts on terrestrial, aquatic and social systems, the Ontario Far North Science Advisory Panel emphasized in its 2010 report the importance of planning access routes and development activities in the Ring of Fire from a broader regional perspective. Specifically, the Panel recommended that Ontario "immediately designate the Ring of Fire as a Priority Management Area with an interim sub-regional planning process."
- Risk-based approaches generally shift the focus from justifying the merits of a particular policy, action, or strategy to highlighting likely outcomes and each outcome's desirability. Making explicit the factors that pose risks to the environment encourages the distribution of accountability and a collective sharing of responsibility for managing risk and assessing trade-offs.
- Recent reviews of Canadian environmental impact assessment under the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* demonstrate that the existing process is failing significantly with respect to assessing and managing for cumulative environmental and social effects. Because the practise narrowly scopes and confines the boundaries of cumulative effects to the specific project, the assessment is divorced from broader regional planning processes and environmental management context. Despite its sustainability mandate, current environmental assessment remains isolated from regional and strategic planning and therefore cannot address sustainability across a region.
- There is a lack of decision-support tools and participatory processes to examine the outcomes of policy, land use planning, and resource management being driven by different Governments and their ministries in this region. For example, community land use planning processes that set development and conservation options in the Far North are proceeding independently of a regional land use strategy legislated by the *Far North Act*, the latter of which has yet to be conceived.
- Ontario is the only jurisdiction in Canada that does not apply environmental assessment legislation to mine development. Recently MNDMF proposed a Class EA approach, a "streamlined" assessment process for "routine projects that have predictable and manageable environmental effects." However, neither mineral exploration nor mining can reasonably be considered to be routine, predictable projects in Ontario's environmentally and socially challenging Far North.

- The naturally dynamic environment in northern boreal ecosystems, particularly under climate change, compromises the ability of social institutions charged with land use decisions, policy, and resource management to understand the potential consequences of choices, particularly when those social institutions are often acting independently from one another. These natural dynamics affect *predictability* (assumes an understanding of the current situation (i.e., baseline) and then the ability to determine how the current situation is made worse or better given specific actions or activities to address impacts) and *manageability* (assumes sufficient experience either through research, previous development, or adaptive management and monitoring approaches that provide some level of understanding of environmental effects).
- The intent of establishing an R-SEA is not to add an additional layer of environmental assessment approvals to resource companies. R-SEAs have evolved in recognition of the need to streamline and focus project level approvals by making them more responsive to regional policies and programs, and setting them within a broader environmental framework. R-SEA integrates the silos of agencies, assessment processes, and policy making and brings current understanding and knowledge of regional, cumulative, and strategic assessment into a consolidated framework. By situating specific project proposals within the R-SEA, companies will gain some certainty by knowing how to fit their project into the broader risk management framework.

### **Precedent for Regional Strategic Environmental Assessment**

- While R-SEA in Canada has been slow to evolve, the notion of a regional and strategic approach to environmental assessment in Canada is not new and has precedents in many R-SEA-like projects beyond the Federal directive.
- Strategic Environmental Assessment is widely recognized internationally ([www.sea.org](http://www.sea.org)) and required by Canadian development agencies funding development projects that have potentially high environmental, social, and economic risks similar to Ontario's Far North.
- R-SEA has been identified as a key area of interest by the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment, which stated in a 2009 report: "An inherently proactive and futures oriented approach, R-SEA is a means to ensure that planning and assessment for a region support the most desired outcomes rather than the most likely ones."
- The components for R-SEA in Ontario exist. For example, some aspects of strategic environmental assessment were present in the initial Class Environmental Assessment for Timber Management and in the Electricity Sector's Plan and associated regulation under the *Environmental Assessment Act*.