



Keeping the “Know” in Nova Scotia:

OECMs (Other Effective area-
based Conservation Measures)
& Land Conservation

April 2026

Introduction

In 2021, the Government of Nova Scotia passed the [Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act](#) (EGCCRA). This Act turned the government's commitment to permanently protect at least 20 per cent of Nova Scotia's lands and water by 2030 into law.

Under the Act, the Province is supposed to conserve high conservation value lands as “protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, including Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas, in a manner consistent with national reporting criteria.”

Doing so will be a significant and meaningful contribution to our [national and international responsibilities to protect biodiversity](#)—as long as we do it right.

New protected areas numbers — but no new protected areas

Environment and Climate Change Minister Tim Halman [recently claimed](#) that 14.55 per cent of Nova Scotia is now protected, but there haven't been any new designations or announcements since [November 2025](#), when the amount of protected land was [13.76 per cent](#). When [questioned](#) about this sudden 0.79 per cent jump, Minister Halman said the increase came from counting OECMs (Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures).

Defining OECMs

So, what are “Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures”?

Protected areas like nature reserves, wilderness areas, provincial parks and national parks are the cornerstones of modern land conservation. These sites protect critical wildlife habitats and are designated (legally protected) primarily for biodiversity and nature conservation. While people are welcome to visit and enjoy these lands, all forms of natural resource extraction and development are prohibited.

An OECM, on the other hand, is a geographically defined area that is managed for reasons other than biodiversity (like watershed protection, historic significance or cultural heritage) but still protects ecologically significant habitat as a secondary or co-benefit.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) [defines an OECM](#) as “a geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and, where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socioeconomic, and other locally relevant values.”

To legitimately contribute to provincial and federal protected areas commitments, an OECM must result in effective and long-lasting biodiversity conservation.

Benefits of OECMs

Unlike traditional protected areas in Nova Scotia, which are largely managed by the provincial or federal government, OECMs can include areas that are protected by Indigenous leadership, municipal governments and private conservation organizations. Lands managed for specific purposes (such as municipal water supply areas, research forests or old-growth forest stands on private woodlots) can legitimately count toward our legislated protected areas target if the protection is strong and long-lasting.

Limitations of OECMs

Environmental groups from across the country have expressed concerns about the potential misuse or distortion of OECMs to [weaken conservation standards](#).

In the Ecology Action Centre's [response](#) to the Province's 2023 [Collaborative Protected Areas Strategy](#), we warned that there is limited potential, but plenty of pitfalls, when it comes to OECMs and land conservation: "Don't rely heavily on so-called Other Effective Conservation Measures (OECMs) to carry the load. Many are weak and fail to adequately protect ecosystem. For example, the Province should not automatically count Protected Water Areas unless the government is prepared to pass new legislation to actually protect them from all activities that harm biodiversity. Some Protected Water Areas designated to support source water protection for municipalities allow resource extraction, which is the opposite of protected."

OECMs and nature conservation in Canada

Until now, OECMs have only been a very minor component for reaching the national 30 per cent protected areas target, because the emphasis has been on actually creating new protected areas. [As of December 2025, only 1.2 per cent of Canada's lands were conserved as OECMs.](#) The new federal [Nature Strategy](#) released on March 31, 2026, has significantly increased Canada's reliance on so-called OECMs. But this can be a very slippery slope.

The federal government is saying that at least an additional 8 per cent of Canada's lands will be considered protected through OECMs, "innovative tools" and "other opportunities on varied lands." (Note: there are no definitions for what these mechanisms actually are or how they will be evaluated for effectiveness.)

We're concerned that the strategy calls for at least 50 per cent of the new protected and conserved areas to be delivered through these dubious, poorly defined and less stringent conservation measures. The federal government appears to be lowering the bar for what counts as protected. Without clear, durable and consistent standards, OECMs could be used to inflate protected area statistics without actually protecting more land or delivering the real biodiversity outcomes we need.

What should qualify as an OECM

OECMs are not meant to be "protection lite" — these areas must still provide long-standing legal protection to meet national and international standards.

To be effective, OECMs must be protected from development and resource extraction, including subsurface extraction like mining, quarrying and fracking.

Legitimate OECMs may include areas that have been designated for some other purpose. For instance, the [Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site](#) is protected because of its national historic significance, but it also has several thousand acres of high-quality undisturbed land around it that legitimately count toward biodiversity objectives. Furthermore, the legislation under which it's protected (*The Canada National Parks Act*) is stringent enough to provide permanent protection.

Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs)

Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) are defined as "lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems."

Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) (continued)

The Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources describes three guiding elements for IPCAs:

- IPCAs are Indigenous-led
- IPCAs represent a long-term commitment to conservation
- IPCAs elevate Indigenous rights and responsibilities

Depending on the specific site, the [Canada-Nova Scotia Nature Agreement](#) states that an IPCA may qualify as either a protected area or an OECM depending on the primary reason for protecting the site.

Either way, embracing Mi'kmaq-led IPCAs in Nova Scotia represents an ongoing commitment to our Treaty Rights and responsibilities, as we care for these unceded lands for the next seven generations and beyond.

What *shouldn't* qualify as an OECM

It would be misguided and misleading to count any of the following as genuine OECMs:

- Sites that don't contribute to biodiversity conservation
- Sites that don't have long-term or permanent protection
- Sites that allow development or resource extraction

What *shouldn't* qualify as an OECM (continued)

Doing so would be convenient for certain industry sectors like mining, oil & gas, industrial forestry, etc., but it would be fraudulent for the government to simply count lands where certain industries can't operate (like steep slopes) or are restricted (buffer areas).

The primary purpose of streamside and wetland buffer areas, for instance, is to preserve water quality, not biodiversity. Tree harvesting there is limited but not forbidden (up to half of the trees can still be removed) and subsurface mineral and fossil fuel extraction is still allowed. For these areas to be legitimately counted toward our protected areas commitments, they should be expanded and would need to be protected in perpetuity against all forms of resource extraction and development.

It would be deeply irresponsible for the provincial government to bow to pressure from industry lobby groups and stretch OECMs beyond credibility. Otherwise, what's to stop the government from counting wildlife clumps, boat launch areas, roadside picnic parks or urban playgrounds toward our 20 per cent by 2030 target?

We must not allow convenience for government or industry to supersede the integrity of national and international conservation standards.

What the Nova Scotia government should do

While there is a genuine role for OECMs to play, it is limited. There is no way that the provincial government can legitimately reach the legislated 20 per cent land protection target on the strength of OECMs.

Instead, the provincial government should:

- 1.** Legally protect the remaining sites from the [2013 Parks and Protected Areas Plan](#). These sites have already been fully vetted by both the NS Department of Environment and the NS Department of Natural Resources and are long overdue for designation. There has already been extensive consultation with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia and the public. The sites are geographically delineated, proposed for protection through legally binding mechanisms (e.g., the Wilderness Areas Protection Act) and are key for long-term biodiversity conservation.

- 2.** Legally protect ecologically significant, community-proposed protected areas, such as the proposed Ingram River Wilderness Area, the proposed Goldsmith Lake Wilderness Area, the proposed Beals Brook Wilderness Area, the proposed Chain Lakes Wilderness Area and the proposed Minamkeak Lake Wilderness Area.

- 3.** Work in good faith with Mi'kmaq Rightsholders to identify and protect Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas.

What the Nova Scotia government should do (continued)

4. Ensure that all OECMs in Nova Scotia meet well-established national and international standards. Both the federal and provincial government hired staff over the last few years to “screen” potential OECMs to see if they can count toward provincial and federal protected areas goals. The Province should work with these in-house experts to ensure that only areas that actually meet the standards and will be legitimately effective at long-term biodiversity conservation are put forward and counted.

5. Be transparent about which areas they’re counting as OECMs and explain how these sites meet the stringent requirements necessary to conserve biodiversity.

In order for them to actually be effective, counting Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures should always be viewed as a supplement to, not a substitute for, designating actual protected areas.

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