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For Immediate Release

Contact:

Jeff Brick
Coordinator, Hydrology and Regulatory Services
Upper Thames River Conservation Authority
(519) 451-2800 ext. 228
brickj@thamesriver.on.ca

Marg Misek-Evans
Senior Planner
County of Oxford
(519) 539-9800 ext. 3205
mevans@county.oxford.on.ca

Oxford Natural Heritage Study Begins

A study is underway to look at the health of Oxford County's woodlands, wetlands, streams and rivers and develop strategies for their long term protection and rehabilitation. The Oxford Natural Heritage Study (ONHS) will recommend ways to maintain and enhance these important local natural resources.

Media representatives are invited to join the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the ONHS project partners on Friday, March 11th at the Vansittart Woods Environmental Education Centre for the project launch. Please join us at 10:15 a.m. for light refreshments. Brief speeches from the following individuals will commence at 10:30 a.m.:

- Mr. Don Woolcott, Warden of Oxford County
- Mr. Michael Harding, Oxford County Councillor and Chair of the ONHS Steering Committee
- Ms. Sheila Simpson, Ontario Trillium Foundation
- Mr. Don Gordon, Ducks Unlimited Canada
- Mr. Ernie Hardeman, MPP, Oxford

A map and directions to the media launch are provided below.

The ONHS will build on two previous natural heritage studies in the County. Woodlands identified as significant in a 1974 study completed by the University of Western Ontario are officially recognized in the County's planning documents. An innovative scientific study undertaken in the late 1990s by the County and the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority further defined the elements of woodland health at the landscape or County level.

"Now it's time to put the two together and come up with a current inventory and assessment of the state of the terrestrial ecosystem in Oxford," says Warden Don Woolcott. "Using 30-year-old information for decision-making does not serve anyone's interests. It's time to update the information and use it to support and promote stewardship activities." In addition to the terrestrial component, the 2005 study will assess the County's aquatic ecosystem.

The seed for the study was planted with a statement of intent in the County's 1995 Official Plan. During the Plan's 5-year review, County and Conservation Authority representatives prepared to undertake the study, with help from organizations such as Ducks Unlimited Canada, the Ministry of Natural Resources, Stewardship Oxford, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Oxford County Federation of Agriculture. Study funding will come from the County, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Ducks Unlimited Canada and Stewardship Oxford. In-kind contributions and support will be provided by the four participating Conservation Authorities, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Federation of Agriculture. The Upper Thames River Conservation Authority is coordinating the 18-month study.

"A healthy environment benefits everyone", said Michael Harding, County Councillor and Chair of the ONHS Steering Committee. "When we protect and enhance our natural areas and waterways, we safeguard our drinking water, help our agricultural community and local economy, create recreational opportunities, and make our

woodlots, wetlands and streams healthier.” The study will also encourage community involvement and action, build on private stewardship activities that are already underway, and increase awareness of our natural capital.

While there are many healthy and productive natural areas and waterways in the County, the loss and degradation of woodlands, wetlands and waterways is a serious environmental concern. The best available information suggests that 20-30% natural cover is needed to sustain species and protect soil, water and air quality. At present, forest cover across Oxford County is generally less, in some cases much less, than this range. Many streams and rivers in the County have poor water quality and aquatic habitat, which stresses fish and other aquatic species.

Most of the land associated with these resources in Oxford County is privately owned, with much of it being farmland. “Farmers have traditionally been good stewards of the land, and many have voluntarily completed farm plans that integrate sound environmental practices with their operations,” said Mr. Harding. “We want to applaud these good managers and, with their cooperation, build on their successes and share stewardship information with others, both rural and urban.” The study will also consider the remaining natural cover and aquatic resources in the County’s urban areas.

Warden Don Woolcott indicated that, since 2002, the County has supported good stewardship, particularly as it relates to water protection, through a financial incentive program for rural landowners called the Clean Water Project. Since 2002, 297 projects with a total project value of \$2,500,000 have been undertaken in Oxford County with a total grant support of \$797,000 from the Clean Water Project. The ONHS will help the County target future financial incentive programs where they can best restore the natural system functions.

In addition to assessing the remaining natural cover and aquatic resources in the County, the ONHS will also consider the range of options for *implementing* the study. This will be undertaken with the assistance of an implementation committee involving local stakeholders. It is anticipated that this process will lead to the identification of a range of options for protection and enhancement appropriate for Oxford County, including programs such as the Clean Water Project. The Steering Committee is in the process of recruiting members to the implementation committee.

DIRECTIONS TO MEDIA LAUNCH:

The media launch will be held at the Vansittart Woods Environmental Education Centre. To get to the Centre, exit the 401 at the Highway No. 2 east exit (Exit 238). Travel east about 2 km, turn north (first left) onto Blandford Road and travel about 2.5 km. The Education Centre is on your left just after you go over the 401.

