



February 20, 2026
The Honourable Julie Dabrusin
Minister of Environment and Climate Change
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6
Delivered via email to: ec.minister-ministre.ec@canada.ca

Re: Request for Designation of a Regional Assessment under Sections 92 and 93 of the *Impact Assessment Act* for the Former Pickering Airport Lands and Contiguous Areas in the Greater Toronto Region

Dear Minister Dabrusin,

We are writing on behalf of the Michi Saagiig Williams Treaties First Nations (MS-WTFN), to formally request, pursuant to sections 92 and 93 of the *Impact Assessment Act* (IAA), that you designate and initiate a Regional Assessment of the effects of existing and future physical activities in the region encompassing the former Pickering Airport lands (Pickering Lands) and adjacent contiguous lands. As MS WTFN, we hold inherent responsibilities to care for and protect the lands, waters, and all living and non-living relatives within our Treaty and Traditional territories. As recorded by Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe Elder Gidigaa Migizi-ban (Doug Williams-ban):

The Pickering Airport Lands and contiguous lands form part of our ancestral homelands and are intimately connected to the Rouge River Valley portage – one of the most important travel and trade routes, linking Lake Ontario to Lake Simcoe. For the Michi Saagiig on the east side of the lake, the Rouge River portage was our route, used for travel, trade, harvesting, and governance, and it connected within the Toronto portage before continuing north to Lake Simcoe. At the mouth of the Rouge River stood a Nishbaabeg village known as Shingwauk-ong, “the place of the pines,” where our people lived seasonally, harvested salmon during the annual runs, and relied on the Rouge River and its tributaries for sustenance and cultural continuity. These lands and waters are not incidental to the Michi Saagiig; they are central to who we are as a people of the big lake and river mouths.¹

We understand this region includes the approximately 8,700 acres of remaining Pickering Lands currently under the custodianship of Transport Canada, as well as the Northeast Pickering Secondary Plan Area lands, the Seaton Community lands, the Rouge National Urban Park (RNUP), and the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve. This request is timely and urgent, given the Government of Canada's recent announcement in January 2025 that the Pickering Lands will no longer be used for a future airport site, coupled with its expressed intent to transfer high-conservation-value portions to Parks Canada to support RNUP and to develop a land management strategy for the remainder, with explicit consideration of requirements for the Alto High-Speed Rail Project. As Rights-holding First Nations, we expect that all federal planning and decision-making associated with these lands will be carried out in a

¹ Gidigaa Migizi-ban, Michi Saagiig Nation Knowledge Keeper. (2020). [Foreword]. In W. Finlayson, *The Draper Site, an Ontario Woodland Tradition Frontier Coalescent Village in Southern Ontario, Canada: Looking Back, Moving Forward* (pp. xxiii – xxviii). https://billfinlayson.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/DraperSite-Finlayson-for-ebook_compressed.pdf



manner consistent with Canada’s commitments under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), including its standards for partnership, cooperation, and joint decision-making. We fully expect to help advance a First Nation-Led Impact Assessment for the Alto High-Speed Rail Project.

Notwithstanding these federal commitments, the current planning environment affecting the Pickering Lands is fragmented and insufficient to address cumulative effects or upholding Aboriginal and Treaty Rights. Municipal and provincial land-use planning processes are proceeding across the region in parallel², without the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) of the Michi Saagiig WTFN, and without any integrated assessment of how multiple existing and foreseeable activities interact across jurisdictions and over time. At the same time, federal land-use and infrastructure planning for the Pickering Lands is already advancing, creating a real risk that zoning, infrastructure corridors, and development assumptions will become entrenched before cumulative environmental, cultural, health, and Rights-based effects are understood. Incremental decision-making in this context risks predetermining outcomes and foreclosing meaningful alternatives, underscoring the necessity of a Regional Assessment as the only mechanism capable of providing a coherent, Rights-affirming, and evidence-based foundation for future federal decisions.

In this context, the Alto High-Speed Rail project is particularly consequential. High-speed rail infrastructure is linear, permanent, and region-shaping in nature, with effects that extend well beyond its immediate construction footprint. In addition to direct land disturbance, such infrastructure can induce secondary development, influence land-use decisions, and fragment ecological and cultural corridors across the landscape. Rail corridors also have the potential to alter hydrogeological conditions and stormwater regimes, inducing impacts to headwaters, groundwater recharge areas, and downstream water quality and flood risk. Absent a Regional Assessment, these effects risk being assessed incrementally and in isolation, rather than in relation to the broader pattern of development already unfolding across the Pickering Lands and contiguous areas.

Transport Canada is indicating that federal departments – including Transport Canada, Parks Canada, Public Services and Procurement Canada, Canada Lands Company, and Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada – are actively assessing options for future uses of these lands, including potential residential and commercial development on portions not required for rail infrastructure. Public Services and Procurement Canada has already initiated coordination with municipalities on zoning, transit, roads, infrastructure capacity, and related technical issues, with formal public consultations planned for Fall 2025.

The Pickering Lands, originally acquired by the federal government in 1972 spanning 18,600 acres across Pickering, Uxbridge, and Markham, represent a critical ecological and cultural corridor just 56 kilometres northeast of Toronto. Prior transfers to Parks Canada in 2015 and 2017 (totaling nearly 10,000 acres) have advanced conservation goals, but the remaining lands hold immense value as potential expansions to the Rouge National Urban Park, a vital green space for biodiversity, Aboriginal and Treaty Rights protection, and urban resilience in the Greater Toronto Area. However, the prospect of high-speed rail integration and subsequent residential and commercial development introduces significant

² For clarity, this includes, for example: ongoing municipal secondary planning and development approvals under the Northeast Pickering Secondary Plan and Seaton Community lands; regional growth, transportation, and servicing planning led by the Regional Municipality of Durham; provincial infrastructure and corridor planning and associated with major transportation and utility projects; and federal land-use and disposition planning led by Transport Canada and Public Services and Procurement Canada. These processes are proceeding under different statutory authorities, timelines, and objectives, and do not provide a for integrated cumulative-effects analysis or Indigenous-led, Rights-based decision-making.



risks of cumulative environmental, health, social, cultural, economic impacts, collectively impacting constitutionally protected Aboriginal and Treaty Rights. These impacts could include:

- Habitat fragmentation;
- The loss of wetlands and forests essential for species at risk (such as the Redside Dace, Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, etc.);
- Adverse impacts on headwaters and water quality in the Lynde Creek, Duffins Creek, Carruthers Creek, and Rouge River watersheds;
- Increased urban sprawl pressures;
- Disruptions to meaningful exercise of Rights to hunt, fish, gather, and access culturally significant areas³;
- Limit opportunities to maintain Indigenous stewardship responsibilities through the Williams Treaties First Nations proposed Indigenous Guardians Program on the Pickering Lands, which would enable co-governance of lands and waters, deliver cultural and ecological monitoring, and uphold the exercise of Aboriginal and Treaty Rights and inherent responsibilities. Recognition and support of Indigenous Guardians programs aligns with Article 18, 19, 29, and 32 of UNDRIP and the IAA's commitment to partnership with Indigenous governing bodies.

Without a comprehensive regional lens, these developments could exacerbate climate vulnerabilities, undermine reconciliation efforts, and conflict with the IAA's sustainability objectives under section 2. A Regional Assessment provides the necessary mechanism to work collaboratively with First Nations, consistent with UNDRIP, to evaluate these cumulative effects in a transparent, Rights-affirming, and co-developed process.

A Regional Assessment is essential to proactively evaluate these cumulative effects, inform the forthcoming land management strategy, and ensure that future physical activities—whether rail construction, park expansions, or urban development—align with Indigenous Knowledge, scientific evidence, and public input. This assessment would build on the IAA's emphasis on early planning (section 91), Indigenous-led processes, and integration of effects on Indigenous Rights and cultures (sections 2(1)(h) and 22(1)(c)). It would also facilitate coordinated decision-making across federal, provincial, and municipal jurisdictions, including the Province of Ontario and the Regional Municipality of Durham, while providing participant funding opportunities for impacted communities.

This request draws precedent from successful prior designations that have advanced regional-scale planning and reconciliation. Notably, in Fall 2019, the Minister received multiple requests from Indigenous Nations and environmental organizations for a Regional Assessment of the Ring of Fire area in northern Ontario – a mineral-rich region facing intense mining and infrastructure pressures. In February 2020, Minister Wilkinson approved this assessment, leading to a co-led process with 15 First Nation partners (including Matawa and Mushkegowuk Councils) and the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada (IAAC).

As detailed in the co-developed Terms of Reference for the Regional Assessment of the Ring of Fire (finalized January 2025), this ongoing assessment examines past, present, and future development effects on environmental, health,

³ Gidigaa Migizi-ban, Michi Saagiig Nation Knowledge Keeper. (2020). [Foreword]. In W. Finlayson, *The Draper Site, an Ontario Woodland Tradition Frontier Coalescent Village in Southern Ontario, Canada: Looking Back, Moving Forward* (pp. xxiii – xxviii). https://billfinlayson.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/DraperSite-Finlayson-for-ebook_compressed.pdf



social, and economic factors, with a focus on cumulative impacts and Indigenous governance. It has fostered cooperative dialogue, secured adequate funding for Indigenous participation, and positioned the region for sustainable development without exempting projects from future IAA reviews — outcomes that directly mirror the needs here. Similarly, the July 2020 request from the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke for a Regional Assessment of the St. Lawrence River area prompted Minister Wilkinson’s July 2021 designation, enabling joint leadership with Indigenous partners to address large-scale development pressures on sensitive ecosystems and cultural sites. These examples demonstrate how responsive ministerial decisions under sections 92 and 93 can enhance the efficiency of subsequent project assessments, respect Aboriginal and Treaty Rights under UNDRIP (incorporated via IAA section 2(1)(n)), and deliver holistic, evidence-based outcomes.

Of particular importance is the inclusion of interested First Nations with deep-rooted connections to the region, whose Rights and interests must be centered in any assessment. The Michi Saagiig Nations – including the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, Alderville First Nation, Curve Lake First Nation, and Hiawatha First Nation – have recognized Aboriginal and Treaty Rights and inherent responsibilities over these lands and waters since time immemorial. Transport Canada's September 2025 letter acknowledges ongoing engagement with Indigenous groups, and a Regional Assessment would operationalize this through co-development of terms of reference, as in the Ring of Fire model, ensuring Indigenous laws, Knowledge, and priorities (e.g., ecological restoration in various watersheds) shape the process. We urge that funding and capacity support be prioritized for these Nations from the outset, in line with the IAA's Participant Funding Program and the Policy Framework for Regional Assessments.

In light of the planned Transport Canada consultations, we respectfully request that you:

1. Designate this Regional Assessment within 90 days, authorizing the IAAC to lead or co-lead with Indigenous partners;
2. Establish terms of reference that encompass the full scope of the Pickering Lands and contiguous areas (Northeast Pickering Secondary Plan Area lands, Seaton Community lands, Rouge National Urban Park, and the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve);
3. Respond in writing with reasons, as required under section 93(3) of the IAA, and post the decision on the IAAC Registry; and
4. Coordinate with Transport Canada to integrate assessment findings into the land management strategy and Alto High-Speed Rail planning.

We are committed to collaborating with your office, the IAAC, and all partners to advance this vital work. Please direct any correspondence or requests for further information to:

- Chief Taynar Simpson: tsimpson@alderville.ca
- Chief Laurie Hockaday: laurieh@curvelake.ca
- Chief Laurie Carr: chiefcarr@hiawathafn.ca
- Chief Kelly LaRocca: kelly.larocca@msifn.ca
- Alderville Consultation Department: jkapyrka@alderville.ca
- Curve Lake Consultation Department: consultation@curvelake.ca
- Hiawatha Consultation Department: dcdc@hiawathafn.ca



- MSIFN Consultation Department: consultation@scugogfirstnation.com

A copy of this request is being forwarded to the IAAC at information@iaac-aeic.gc.ca, per operational guidance. Thank you for your leadership in upholding the IAA's commitment to sustainable development, reconciliation and the implementation of UNDRIP as the minimum standard for partnership with Indigenous peoples. We look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

<Original signed by>

<Original signed by>

<Original signed by>

<Original signed by>

Chief Taynar Simpson
Alderville First Nation

Chief Laurie Hockaday
Curve Lake First Nation

Chief Laurie Carr
Hiawatha First Nation

Chief Kelly LaRocca
Scugog Island First Nation

Cc:

- information@iaac-aeic.gc.ca
- TC.MinisterofTransport-MinistredesTransports.TC@tc.gc.ca
- andrew.campbell@pc.gc.ca
- Stephanie.hebert@tc.gc.ca
- David.millar@pc.gc.ca
- Farrah.fleurimond@tc.gc.ca
- Kimber.trainor@pc.gc.ca
- allendria.brunjes@pc.gc.ca
- Lindsay.rodger@pc.gc.ca
- da.chen@tc.gc.ca
- Keri.holtbylevine@tc.gc.ca
- Vera.haslett@tc.gc.ca



Appendix A – IAA Annex 1: Guiding Questions

1. Is large-scale development, including potential designated projects under the Act, expected in the next 5–10 years in the region?

Yes.

- Residential, commercial and industrial development on Seaton lands, Northeast Pickering Secondary Plan Area lands, and Transport Canada former Pickering Airport lands, including the associated pipeline and transmission line infrastructure and substantial cumulative effects.
- Alto High-Speed Rail.

2. Are there environmentally or otherwise sensitive areas or components located in the region that might be affected by development?

Yes.

- Impacts to federally listed species at risk, including their habitat (as a result of habitat loss, alteration and fragmentation), direct and indirect mortality, sensory disturbance and functional habitat loss.
- Impacts of the introduction of invasive species, including phragmites.
- Specific concern about Red-Headed Woodpecker, Cerulean Warbler, Canada Warbler, Golden-Winged Warbler, Least Bittern, Redside Dace, Yellow-Breasted Chat, Barn Swallow, Bank Swallow, Bobolink, Wood Thrush, Eastern Meadowlark, Eastern Wood-pewee, Eastern Loggerhead Shrike, Eastern whip-poor-will, Common Nighthawk, Black Tern, Acadian Flycatcher, Yellow-banded Bumblebee, Blanding's Turtle, Eastern Musk Turtle, Snapping Turtle, Midland Painted Turtle, Northern Map Turtle, Tri-coloured Bat, Northern long-eared Myotis, Little Brown Bat, King Rail, North American River Otter, North American Beaver, American Mink, Eastern Milksnake, Atlantic Salmon, Eastern Pondmussel, Black Purseweb Spider, Butternut, Black Ash, Bashful Bulrush, and Monarch Butterfly.

3. Does current and future development in the region have the potential to cause adverse effects, including cumulative effects, that fall within federal jurisdiction?

Yes.

- Effects on fish and fish habitat – Yes
 - Impacts to fish and fish habitat, including Brown Trout, Rainbow Trout, American Eel, Coho Salmon and Chinook salmon in Little Rouge River, Rouge River, Petticoat Creek, Duffins Creek, and their tributaries.
 - Degradation or loss of fish habitat and resulting impacts on fish populations, including culturally significant fish species.
 - Impacts of road salts resulting from developments on tributaries.
- Effects on aquatic species, as defined in subsection 2(1) of the *Species at Risk Act* - Yes
 - For example, Redside Dace, Lamprey, Lake Sturgeon, and Freshwater mussels.
- Effects on migratory birds – Yes



- Impacts to migratory birds, including their habitat, from development activities including from destruction, disturbance and fragmentation of habitat (including ability to forage and nest), habitat avoidance, sensory disturbance (including light and noise pollution) and the disturbance and destruction of individuals, nests and eggs.
 - Impacts of opportunistic predators associated with urban areas.
 - Impacts to Great Blue Heron population, which is already reduced by development, including in the area of Taunton Road as well as in the Cherrywood Swamp Complex.
 - Concern about impacts to geology given the unique geology of the area creates unique habitat for birds.
 - Specific concern about cliff, bank, and barn swallows and their habitat.
 - Specific concern with respect to bird nests around Petticoat Creek.
- Changes to the environment on federal lands – Yes
 - Effects to the Rouge National Urban Park, its ecological integrity and its ability to meet its park management plan objectives.
 - Impacts of potential developments within Transport Canada federal lands.
 - Changes to the environment that occur in a province or territory other than the one where the project is taking place – Yes
 - Greenhouse gas emissions and resulting climate change attributable to increased development.
 - Changes to the environment that occur outside of Canada – Yes
 - Greenhouse gas emissions and resulting climate change attributable to increased development.
 - Changes to the environment that could affect the Indigenous peoples of Canada – Yes
 - Development that proceeds without Indigenous-led monitoring frameworks increases the risk of unaddressed cumulative effects. A regional assessment should formally evaluate how Indigenous Guardians can function as an early-warning system for ecological degradation, cultural site disturbance, and rights impacts across the Pickering Lands and contiguous areas.
 - See response to Guiding Question #4.
 - Any change occurring to the health, social or economic conditions of the Indigenous peoples of Canada – Yes
 - See response to Guiding Question #4.
 - Changes to components of the environment, health, social or economic matters set out in Schedule 3 of the Act – Yes
 - See response to Guiding Question #2 and #3.
- 4. Does development in the region have the potential to cause adverse impacts on the rights of Indigenous people?**

Yes.



Residential, commercial, and industrial development, along with major linear infrastructure projects (e.g. rail, roads, transmission, etc.) can adversely affect the Rights of Indigenous peoples in many interconnected ways. These impacts relate not only to the environment but also to cultural continuity, governance, self-determination, and social well-being.

i. Impacts on Land Rights and Territory

- Many Indigenous Rights—Aboriginal and Treaty Rights and our inherent Rights—are tied directly to land and waters.
- How development causes harm:
 - Loss of access to traditional lands through urban expansion, zoning changes, industrial sites, or private land conversion.
 - Fragmentation of territory that disrupts travel routes, traplines, and cultural-use areas.
 - Encroachment on unceded or contested lands, undermining land claims or governance negotiations.
- Why this matters:
 - The right to use land for hunting, fishing, gathering, ceremonies, and stewardship is legally protected. Development that blocks or degrades these areas infringes on these recognized Rights.

ii. Impacts on Indigenous Stewardship Authority and Monitoring Capacity

- Development that proceeds without embedding Guardians in planning and oversight structures can undermine Indigenous jurisdiction, stewardship responsibilities, and long-term monitoring capacity.
- How development causes harm:
 - Failure to fund and institutionalize Guardians reduces Indigenous ability to monitor cumulative effects.
 - Exclusion from adaptive management decisions weakens Indigenous governance authority.
 - Short-term project monitoring displaces long-term, land-based stewardship systems.
- Why this matters:
 - Guardians are not discretionary programs; they are expressions of inherent responsibilities and mechanisms through which Aboriginal and Treaty Rights are exercised and upheld. A regional assessment must evaluate how future development either supports or undermines Indigenous-led monitoring and co-governance structures.

iii. Effects on Cultural Practices and Identity

- Indigenous cultural practices are deeply connected to specific landscapes, species, ecosystems and waters.
- Development impacts:
 - Loss of culturally important species (Salmon, Bear, Black Ash, Butternut, Sugar Maple, plant medicines) due to habitat destruction or pollution.
 - Reduced ability to practice ceremonies, harvesting, and land-based education when land is altered or inaccessible.



- Disruption of sacred sites, burial grounds, and cultural landscapes.
 - Why this matters:
 - Inherent and Cultural Rights are recognized in Canadian law and UNDRIP. When development makes it impossible to pass on traditions, it harms cultural survival.
- iv. Impacts on Health and Well-Being
- Housing and industrial development can affect both physical and mental health, for example:
 - Air and water pollution from industrial facilities that disproportionately affect nearby Indigenous communities.
 - Overcrowding or inadequate housing created by poorly planned development, raising health risks.
 - Loss of land-based food sources, contributing to food insecurity and chronic illnesses.
 - Why this matters:
 - Health is recognized as a determinant of Indigenous Rights and dignity; harm to health can amount to Rights violations.
- v. Undermining Self-Determination and Governance
- Development approvals sometimes proceed without meaningful Indigenous consultation and participation. Harms include:
 - Lack of consultation or consent, which violates the duty to consult and accommodate.
 - Top-down land-use decisions that disregard Indigenous laws or governance systems.
 - Erosion of Indigenous planning authority, especially for communities trying to implement their own land-use plans.
 - Why this matters:
 - Self-determination is a core Indigenous right, including the ability to decide how land is used.
- vi. Economic Marginalization
- Development can create economic barriers instead of opportunities. For example:
 - Exclusion from jobs or contracting benefits associated with industrial projects.
 - Rising housing costs due to new developments that displace Indigenous families from urban or traditional areas.
 - Loss of traditional economies and land-based livelihoods without fair compensation.
 - Why this matters:
 - Economic security is connected to the right to maintain traditional ways of life and benefit from development occurring on Indigenous lands.
- vii. Increased Social Inequities



- Housing and industrial development can lead to:
 - Social displacement (e.g., Indigenous people priced out of their communities).
 - Over-policing or criminalization as urban development increases surveillance in traditionally Indigenous spaces.
 - Cultural isolation, especially when communities are removed from land-based activities.
- Why this matters:
 - These impacts compound colonial patterns and disproportionately burden Indigenous peoples.

viii. Cumulative Effects Intensify Impacts

- Even if a single development seems minor, the combined effects of roads, housing expansions, industrial sites, mines, or forestry can:
 - Degrade ecosystems beyond recovery
 - Sever movement corridors for people and wildlife
 - Erase cultural landscapes
 - Create long-term, intergenerational harm
- Cumulative effects are a major mechanism by which Rights are impaired.

5. How would the regional assessment inform future federal impact assessments?

A regional assessment of the Pickering Lands and contiguous areas would create a shared, authoritative knowledge base and regulatory expectations for the region. Future federal impact assessments (e.g. Alto High-Speed Train) could use this information to be more efficient, more targeted, more consistent, and better aligned with Indigenous and regional priorities. This is consistent with the goals outlined in the Federal government’s Budget 2025, including for the Major Projects Office to work to accelerate engineering, regulatory, and permitting work to enable construction on the Alto High-Speed Train in four years instead of eight years.

A regional assessment of the lands identified in the map attached at Appendix B would:

- i. Provide Baseline Environmental, Social, Health, and Economic Data
 - Regional assessments compile existing scientific knowledge and regional studies.
 - Future project assessments can rely on this data instead of recreating it, reducing duplication.
- ii. Identify Cumulative Effects Early
 - Regional assessments map out past, present, and future foreseeable activities in the region and evaluate their combined effects.
 - Individual project assessments can focus on project-specific contributions instead of redoing cumulative-effects work from scratch.
- iii. Establish Indigenous Guardians as a Regional Monitoring Framework
 - A regional assessment could:



- Establish the WTFN Indigenous Guardians Program as a core regional cumulative-effects monitoring mechanism.
 - Define long-term funding commitments for Guardians-led ecological, cultural, and health monitoring.
 - Integrate Indigenous Knowledge and Guardian observations into adaptive management triggers.
 - Require federal departments to rely on Guardian-generated data in future project-level assessments.
- iv. Clarify What Issues Need Deeper or Less Analysis Later
- Regional assessments can conclude that:
 - Certain topics are well understood → require less analysis in future project assessments.
 - Certain topics pose concern → require enhanced analysis or mitigation.
 - This helps tailor project-level IA scope.
- v. Streamline the Impact Assessment Process
- By resolving many information gaps at the regional level, future project assessments can:
 - Proceed faster;
 - Be more predictable; and
 - Have fewer study requirements.
 - The Act allows the Minister or Governor in Council to substitute or incorporate regional assessment results directly into project-level assessments.
- vi. Support Better Decision-Making and Mitigation Planning
- Regional assessments generate regional-scale mitigation options, thresholds, or planning guidance.
 - These can become conditions, best practices, or requirements for future projects in the region.
- vii. Enhance Indigenous Partnership and Rights Consideration
- Indigenous governing bodies can co-lead or partner in regional assessments.
 - This ensures that future project-level assessments are grounded in Indigenous Knowledge, land-use information, and priorities from the outset.
- viii. Help Determine Whether Certain Projects Even Need an Impact Assessment
- Findings can guide regulators on:
 - which types of projects pose minimal risk regionally
 - which thresholds or triggers should be applied
 - whether certain project classes may be excluded or require full assessment



Appendix B – Map

