

February 23, 2018

An open letter to all concerned conservation interests regarding the future of native tree seed in southern Ontario.

In August of 2017 the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry announced its intention to close the Ontario Tree Seed Plant (OTSP) located in Angus Ontario, with the closure slated for September 2018.

Shortly after the government's announcement, a group of concerned clients of the OTSP came together to assess the impacts the closure of the seed plant will have on their programs and aspirations. A fruitful dialogue with Ministry staff was initiated to search for ways to mitigate those impacts.

Part of the Ministry's rationale for closing the OTSP, was that it is aging and operated at a level far below its original capacity, ultimately making it inefficient from a cost and operational perspective. Regardless, the OTSP and the seed that it has produced form the foundation on which most ecological restoration efforts across southern Ontario are based on. Simply put, it takes a seed to grow a tree and many genetically appropriate seeds to replace a forest. Ontario will need billions of genetically appropriate seeds in the coming decades as we grapple with challenges such as climate change adaptation, biodiversity loss, restoring Species at Risk habitat and controlling invasive species through restoration.

Many of you participated in a letter writing campaign to ask the government to reconsider its decision to close the OTSP and for that we thank you sincerely. Despite our campaign, plans to shutter the facility are proceeding, and this letter provides you with an update on our efforts to date and our plans to ensure all the activities offered by the OTSP will be replaced.

Ontario Tree Seed Coalition (OTSC)

This loosely knit group includes Forests Ontario, Forest Gene Conservation Association, the five southern Crown Land Sustainable Forest Licence Holders, and several growers who provide Ontario source-identified nursery stock (Somerville Seedlings and Ferguson Tree Nursery). This coalition and its membership is not exclusive, however with so many things to accomplish and challenges to tackle in such a short time frame, this initial group has focused on moving forward. Discussions and negotiations with the provincial government have been led by Forest Ontario (FO) and the Forest Gene Conservation Association (FGCA) and their members and partners. Both organizations are broad based, well-networked organizations committed to forest health and well-being, and collaboration with similarly focused organizations.

Progress to Date

The first task was to understand what should be included in a fully functional seed management system. It is safe to say that with the OTSP being a fixture on the landscape since 1923 many of these functions "just seemed to happen." While organizations like FO and FGCA and native seedling nurseries were active in many operational aspects of seed management, the OTSP was the hub and facilitator of all of these activities. As such the OTSP was largely taken for granted and was not well recognized for its essential role in the whole ecosystem restoration cycle. To replace what has existed at the OTSP for decades, we have identified that the following six discrete processes are required for the sustainability of a future seed system:

1. Seed demand forecasting - Determine number of seed of each seed source and species required by conservation and restoration agencies. Nurseries typically require three years to produce a seedling. For example, to produce tree seedlings for 2021 planting, we need to collect or have seed in storage by 2018.
2. Seed crop forecasting - Monitoring what crops are developing for over 120 species across Ontario. We need to be in a position to organize collection activities at the exact time crops ripen wherever they occur.
3. Seed collection - Coordinate a seed collector network to facilitate collectors' essential role in providing high quality seed that is source identified, appropriately handle thousands of bags of cones and trays of fruit each year until they can be sown or further processed and stored.
4. Seed extraction & processing – Extract seeds from cones and fruit, sort, clean and dry down to appropriate moisture content for storage, etc.
5. Seed storage - Long-term frozen (up to 20 years) storage of orthodox seed in airtight containers, regular seed quality monitoring and testing for viability (germination % and vigour).
6. Seed source tracking - Maintain chain of custody (seed source identification) throughout the seed collection, extraction and processing, and storage processes to ensure seed of known origin is available to produce nursery stock appropriate for planting sites across Ontario.

In other provinces like British Columbia, the management of native seed has been deemed “mission critical” however Ontario has taken a different direction and is getting out of the business of seed management. OTSC members have therefore created a work plan addressing all issues that will result from the closure of the seed plant and reduced government involvement in seed operations. Major items within the work plan that are in progress or complete include:

- A. The acquisition of tree seed from the Ontario Tree Seed Plant inventory (to be utilized in Ontario-based programs),
- B. A draft discussion paper that outlines the complexities of native seed management.

Ongoing work plan efforts include:

- A. Identifying and securing high quality long-term storage for the current seed inventory,
- B. Developing a business plan that includes and proposes a mechanism for all of the steps listed above,
- C. Working with government to secure adequate, stable, long-term funding to ensure that we continue to have a system in place that will provide source identified and native seed for restoration programs into the future.

Many organizations including Conservation Authorities and Municipalities are the ultimate end users of a seed management system. Your support is critical to the success of what we are trying to accomplish. There are several ways in which you and other concerned agencies and organizations can assist at this time:

- Advocate strongly for provincial support for a native seed management system that is long term, stable and sustainable in nature,
- Provide input into plans and documents produced by the OTSC when requested,
- Contribute to the development of our Seed Collection Area Network (SCAN) by identifying stands of good seed production potential in your areas of jurisdiction,
- Continue to support ecological restoration and reforestation projects in your jurisdictions using seed sources that are adapted to your local conditions, and advocate strongly for more support for them at every opportunity.

If southern Ontario is to approach the minimum accepted level of ecological sustainability of 30% natural cover on the landscape we will require the naturalization of 600,000 ha which will take approximately 2 billion new trees. Clearly there is both need and demand for seed in Ontario.

Sincerely,



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