# Ontario government introduces Bill 5 to overhaul environmental protection



On April 17, 2025, the Ontario government introduced Bill 5, officially titled the Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy Act, marking a major shift in environmental protection legislation within the province. The bill, which passed its first reading swiftly at Queen’s Park, aims to reduce regulatory barriers to economic development, particularly in critical resource and infrastructure sectors, amid ongoing economic uncertainty exacerbated by U.S. President Donald Trump’s tariff policies.

Premier Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservative (PC) government assert that Bill 5 is necessary to “cut red tape,” unlock mining potential, and stimulate job creation in Northern Ontario and across the province. However, the legislation has sparked considerable controversy and opposition from environmentalists, Indigenous leaders, and political figures, who warn that it effectively dismantles long-standing environmental safeguards and Indigenous rights.

Bill 5 grants the provincial government unprecedented powers to designate “special economic zones” and approve large-scale projects without regard to existing provincial or municipal laws. It also allows for the exemption of “trusted proponents” from regulations, including those designed to protect the environment and Indigenous treaty rights. As a result, infrastructure and resource development projects could bypass key environmental assessments and public consultations.

The bill proposes the repeal of Ontario’s Endangered Species Act (ESA), replacing it with a new Species Conservation Act. Environmental advocates contend this new act offers far weaker protections for at-risk wildlife, removing mandatory recovery goals and limiting enforcement officers' ability to prevent habitat harm. Notably, the definition of “habitat” under the new act narrows protections to only immediate dwelling areas, neglecting the larger critical habitats species require for feeding, breeding, and migration.

Laura Bowman, an Ecojustice staff lawyer, described Bill 5 as “an irrational vendetta against vulnerable ecosystems, plants, and animals.” She emphasised to The Pointer on April 22 that “the proposed Species Conservation Act would not protect species, full stop,” and criticised its removal of recovery as a goal, warning the bill is “designed to make species extinct.” Bowman highlighted the bill’s departure from scientific standards, saying, “Imagine an animal with a den that wanders around gathering food…To protect the species…the full range they rely on throughout their life cycle must be preserved. Under the new definition, habitat protection would be limited to just the den and the immediate area around it.”

The province’s auditor general has found that permits allowing harm to species at risk habitat have increased dramatically—over 6,000 percent since 2008—and many were automatically approved, suggesting the ministry previously facilitated habitat damage. Critics see Bill 5 as worsening this trend.

Ontario’s Indigenous leadership has raised concerns about the bill’s impact on sovereignty and consultation processes. Ontario Regional Chief Abram Benedict warned in a press release that “these ‘special economic zones’ are vaguely defined and could be used to try and undermine our rights and ignore our sovereignty.” He stated that developments must involve consultations and free consent from each affected Nation.

Bill 5 also incorporates the Special Economic Zones Act, which permits the Lieutenant Governor in Council to exempt projects from virtually any law, including municipal bylaws related to health, safety, or environmental protection. This has prompted comparisons to a “Henry VIII clause,” where executive powers override legislative checks. Critics argue this provision significantly reduces public oversight and legal recourse, potentially silencing opposition.

The bill’s timing amid the federal election campaign and trade tensions with the United States has led figures like Green Party Leader Mike Schreiner to accuse the government of using external economic anxieties to justify weakening environmental protections. Schreiner told The Pointer that “protecting nature & farmland is not red tape,” and cautioned that “gutting environmental protections will make us more vulnerable to the impacts of tariffs and less self-reliant.”

Similarly, Ontario NDP representatives expressed grave concerns about the bill’s implications for endangered species and environmental safeguards.

Environmental organisations and naturalists across Ontario have mounted significant opposition. Victor Doyle, former senior Ontario planner and architect of the Greenbelt Plan, described the government’s approach as “old school thinking” that conflicts with economic realities, calling Bill 5 a continuation of the Progressive Conservatives’ history of exempting developments from existing laws.

The bill expands on exemptions for projects such as the contested Ontario Place megaspa development, removing public consultation requirements and limiting environmental assessments. Ann Elisabeth Samson, co-chair of Ontario Place for All, criticised the legislation for “removing the last shreds of accountability,” asserting it prioritises “silencing opposition and avoiding scrutiny.”

Conservation authorities, long tasked with managing natural resources and watersheds in Ontario since 1946, will see their powers further reduced under Bill 5 and related legislation. This follows previous government moves in 2020 and 2022, which limited conservation authorities’ input on development matters and gave ministers more approval authority, particularly related to Greenbelt lands.

The Greenbelt, created in 2005 as the largest protected greenspace globally to preserve clean air, water, and wildlife habitat, has faced ongoing threats from the current government. Ford’s previous 2018 promise to open the Greenbelt to development materialised in 2022 but was later shelved following public backlash and investigations by the province's auditor general and integrity commissioner into favouritism toward certain developers. Despite this, critics view Bill 5 as a continuation of attempts to erode protections for green spaces.

Attention also focuses on the Ring of Fire mineral-rich region northeast of Thunder Bay, which could be designated a special economic zone. This would exempt it from environmental laws, threatening low-lying swamp ecosystems vital for carbon storage and climate regulation.

Shane Moffatt of Ontario Nature underscored the urgency of protecting Ontario’s biodiversity, saying, “After years of neglect, endangered species in Ontario urgently need more protection, not less.” He expressed concern that “bulldozing endangered species protections is only going to unleash more problems in the long run.”

Other environmental advocates such as Katie Krelove of Wilderness Committee called Bill 5 “an anti-democratic attack on environmental protection,” while Margaret Prophet from Simcoe County Greenbelt Coalition described it as “a fire sale of our freedoms,” warning of the erosion of community rights and Indigenous treaty protections.

The government claims to offset some concerns by pledging $20 million annually for species conservation projects, but the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks clarified that this funding will not support enforcement activities. The Species Conservation Action Agency, established in 2021 to manage developer contributions aimed at habitat conservation, has yet to allocate any funds to conservation efforts despite accumulating millions. This raises doubts about the effectiveness of the proposed conservation measures.

Experts fear that various elements of the bill, including the removal of mandatory species recovery goals and broad exemptions for economic projects, could accelerate biodiversity loss and degrade Ontario’s natural heritage.

Environmentalist Jim Richards, founder of the Second Marsh Defence Association, characterised the bill as “a betrayal to the people,” drawing parallels to authoritarian governance styles. Phil Pothen of Environmental Defence noted Ontario’s policies under Bill 5 bear troubling similarities to deregulatory approaches seen in the United States, suggesting the province is “jumping on the U.S. bandwagon.”

As of late April 2025, opposition is mounting with experts, advocacy groups, Indigenous leaders, and political parties mobilising against Bill 5 and its potential passage, reflecting widespread concern about the future of environmental protection, Indigenous sovereignty, and democratic accountability in Ontario.

The Pointer reports that the proposed legislation represents a significant departure from existing environmental standards, with far-reaching consequences for Ontario’s ecosystems, communities, and governance. The rapid introduction and passage of Bill 5 has intensified debates over balancing economic development with environmental stewardship and Indigenous rights in the province.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-44/session-1/bill-5> - This URL provides the official details of Bill 5, the Protect Ontario by Unleashing Our Economy Act, 2025, which includes provisions for special economic zones and changes to environmental legislation.
2. <https://wwf.ca/media-releases/bill-5-dismantling-ontario-environmental-safeguards-endangered-species-extinction/> - This article highlights Bill 5’s impact on environmental safeguards, particularly its weakening of protections for endangered species and the redefinition of habitat, which diminishes science-based decision-making.
3. <https://ontarionature.org/news-release/bill-5-bulldozes-critical-endangered-species-protections/> - This news release emphasizes how Bill 5 undermines biodiversity protections in Ontario by weakening the Endangered Species Act and limiting environmental enforcement.
4. <https://ero.ontario.ca/notice/025-0416> - This notice discusses the proposed amendments in Bill 5, including changes to the Rebuilding Ontario Place Act, reflecting broader economic development strategies.
5. <https://environmentaldefence.ca/2025/04/17/bill-5-would-end-endangered-species-protections-and-attack-clean-energy/> - This article explains how Bill 5 not only ends meaningful endangered species protections but also potentially restricts clean energy options by banning certain international components.
6. <https://www.noahwire.com (no specific article provided)> - The source article mentioned here generally supports the background and opposition against Bill 5, highlighting concerns from environmentalists, Indigenous leaders, and political figures.
7. <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMiowFBVV95cUxNMkdLWEJHY1E4d2pyNXROdElhS0dCWHdCUDlmYXRkWmNMVnROd0pLajNQaFV5SHcxNmZ2MEloRjBGVkpWdmJNLURhQ2pSUjZ0SWZ6UE8xTUlZZHc5YzRmRjdxVkdZbnR2Qnl6cC1EUmJNeWxZWHFZOG5XdHFKTzFnLWFVWG9MeGY4M0RLVHlrejNGN0Z0aTktV2l0SWRaX2xEeVlr?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data