



NCC - Government of Canada

Natural Areas Conservation Program

2015-2016 Annual Progress Report

Inception to Date: April 1, 2015 to March 31, 2016

**NCC – Government of Canada  
Natural Areas Conservation Program**

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# NCC - Government of Canada Natural Areas Conservation Program 2015-2016 Annual Progress Report

## Introduction

The previous Natural Areas Conservation Program (the “Previous Program<sup>1</sup>”) was a \$245M federally funded program formalized between The Nature Conservancy of Canada (“NCC”) and the Government of Canada, commencing April 1, 2007 to May 31, 2015. Under the Previous Program, NCC and partners (including Ducks Unlimited Canada and Other Qualified Organizations) were successful in securing 393,224 hectares, of which 299,099 hectares provided habitat for 173 COSEWIC-assessed species at risk and 291,470 hectares provided habitat for 143 SARA listed species at risk.

The Natural Areas Conservation Program (the “Program”) was formalized once more through the signing of an additional Federal Funding Agreement (the “Agreement”) for \$100M between NCC and the Government of Canada on February 20, 2015 for the period covering September 11, 2014 through to March 31, 2019. As per Section 7(b)(iii) of the Agreement, NCC is pleased to present the 2015-2016 Annual Progress Report, reporting accomplishments achieved under the Program between the period of April 1, 2015 to March 31, 2016.

The aim of this public-private partnership between NCC and the Government of Canada is to secure over 130,000 hectares of ecologically sensitive lands, implement Property Management Plan Actions on an estimated 120,000 hectares of lands secured under the Program and Previous Program, monitor the compliance of Conservation Agreements on an estimated 100,000 hectares of lands secured under the Program and Previous Program, and provide for capacity development within the land trust community to enable future involvement in securing and stewarding conservation lands.

Through the ongoing efforts of NCC and its various Canadian partner organizations [including Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) and Other Qualified Organizations (OQOs)]<sup>2</sup>; this unique program continues to successfully leverage the federal government’s significant financial investment by delivering cost-effective, focused and successful conservation results.

In the 2015-2016 period, NCC and its partners (DUC and OQOs) expensed a total of \$22.5M in Program funds<sup>3</sup>. Approximately \$21.3M of the \$22.5M in Program funds was used to acquire 20,654 hectares of ecologically sensitive land, implement stewardship activities on 208,322 hectares of land and achieve communication activities; the remaining \$1.2M in Program funds was utilized for the purposes of Program Coordination and Capacity Development.

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<sup>1</sup> “Previous Program” is defined throughout this report as the Agreement executed in 2007 and the Amended Agreement executed in 2013 between NCC and the Government of Canada.

<sup>2</sup> The term “OQO”, which is referenced throughout this report, is not inclusive of DUC.

<sup>3</sup> “Program funds” refers specifically, and is limited to, the financial investment of monies from the Government of Canada under the Natural Areas Conservation Program.

The details of this Annual Progress Report are divided into two main sections, each consisting of several sub-sections to address the various reporting elements required under the Agreement. The detailed information for all the content in this report can be found in the accompanying appendices.

Section A: The Natural Areas Conservation Program - Financial Statements: This section reports on the investment and management of the Natural Areas Conservation Program funds.

Section B: The Natural Areas Conservation Program - Program Deliverables: This section highlights conservation achievements and results against the deliverables and purposes set out in the Agreement.

## SECTION A - The Natural Areas Conservation Program – Financial Statements

As required under Section 7(b)(iii) of the Agreement, the following presents the financial results of the Program.

### 1. The Financial Statements of the Natural Areas Conservation Program.

NCC's auditors, Ernst & Young LLP (E&Y), have submitted their financial report, which reports expenses incurred by both NCC and OQOs from inception of the Program to March 31, 2016. DUC's auditors (E&Y) have also submitted a financial report for the 2015-2016 period. These reports are attached as Appendix 1A and 1B.

#### 1.1 The Financial Statements of the Program for the 2015-2016 Period.

In the 2015-2016 period, as seen on page 5 of Appendix 1A, expenditures incurred under the Program amounted to \$22.5M in Program funds (\$20,769,451 incurred by NCC, \$1M incurred by DUC, and \$730,549 incurred by OQOs). An amount of \$20.25M in Program funds was advanced from the Government of Canada to NCC shortly after the 2015-2016 Work Plan was submitted and approved. As per the Agreement<sup>4</sup>, the outstanding \$2.25M will be issued to NCC upon receipt and acceptance by the Government of Canada of this Annual Progress Report, which is accounted for on page 4 of Appendix 1A

#### 1.2 The Financial Statements of the Program from September 11, 2014 to March 31, 2016.

NCC, DUC, and OQO projects are extensively documented and rigorously assessed to ensure all projects meet the requirements of the Program before contributions of Program funds are approved and disbursed. Once NCC projects are approved, Program funds are accounted for by NCC regions as deferred funds, and are then expensed as the project proceeds; however, Program funds are not drawn and disbursed until NCC has confirmed that the project will close. In the case of OQO projects, project applications are reviewed by an OQO Project Review Committee, and successful organizations are required to submit appropriate documentation to NCC prior to the release of Program funds. DUC projects are submitted to NCC for pre-approval by way of a Conservation Project Summary (CPS) to ensure that all DUC projects meet the requirements of the Program before Program funds are disbursed at the end of the period. Both OQO and DUC fee simple projects are required to have landholding agreements registered on title in NCC's name to protect the conservation values of the project in perpetuity.

As of March 31, 2016, a total of \$32.5M in Program funds has been expensed under the Program by NCC, DUC and OQOs, of which approximately \$30.8M has been expensed

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<sup>4</sup> Section 6(c).

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on direct Program delivery and approximately \$1.7M on Program Coordination, as shown on page 5 of Appendix 1A.

## **2. Statement of Expenditures for Program Coordination in the 2015-2016 Period.**

In accordance with Section 5(c)(vii) of the Agreement, NCC is permitted to charge up to \$5M under the Program to support Program Coordination. NCC may charge up to 1.5% of this \$5M (\$75K) to develop capacity to better situate NCC to secure and steward land in the future, specifically the self-assessment against the *Canadian Land Trust Standards and Practices* (CLT S&Ps).

Table 1 below summarizes the amount of Program Coordination and Capacity Development expensed with Program funds by NCC, DUC and OQOs in the 2015-2016 period. In the 2015-2016 period, \$1,172,619 in Program funds was expensed under Program Coordination (\$1,125,000 for NCC and \$47,619 for DUC). OQOs are not awarded funds under the Program for the purposes of Program Coordination. OQO Capacity Development funds will be disbursed in the 2016-2017 period under the new OQO Capacity Development Funding Program, and will be reported in the following 2016-2017 Annual Progress Report.

**Table 1:** Summary of Program Coordination for the 2015-2016 Period.

Organization	Program Coordination
NCC	\$1,125,000
DUC	\$47,619
OQO	<i>Not Applicable</i>
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$1,172,619</b>

## **3. Consolidated Direct Program Expenditures in the 2015-2016 Period.**

Conservation work under the Program continues to be conducted for NCC within NCC Priority Natural Areas (PNAs); for DUC within North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) Priority Areas; and for OQOs within PNAs, NAWMP Priority Areas, or other Conservation Planning Frameworks. Table 2 summarizes direct Program delivery expenses by Organization. Additionally, Appendix 2A, 2B and 2C record the amount of Program funds expensed under direct Land Securement Activities and Stewardship Implementation Actions, listed by PNA for NCC, NAWMP Priority Area for DUC, or by region for OQOs. A breakdown of total Program expenditures (including both matching funds and Program funds) by expense category is recorded in Appendix 5.

**Table 2:** Summary of Total Direct Program Expenditures by Organization Financed with Program funds in the 2015-2016 Period.

Org.	Purchase Price of Land <sup>5</sup>	Securement Acquisition and Support Costs	Stewardship Implementation Activity Costs	Communication Activity Costs	Capacity Development Costs	Total (\$)
NCC	\$13,894,806	\$1,720,237 <sup>6</sup>	\$3,775,973	\$253,434	\$-- <sup>7</sup>	<b>\$19,644,450</b>
DUC	\$808,395	\$115,540	\$13,668	<i>Not Applicable</i>	\$14,778	<b>\$952,381</b>
OQO	\$526,656	\$203,893	<i>Not Applicable</i>	<i>Not Applicable</i>	\$0	<b>\$730,549</b>
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$15,229,857</b>	<b>\$2,039,670</b>	<b>\$3,789,641</b>	<b>\$253,434</b>	<b>\$14,778</b>	<b>\$21,327,380<sup>8</sup></b>

#### 4. Matching Contributions

Under the Program, NCC is expected to match the \$100M of federal investment on a 2:1 basis with non-federal donations. This commitment is managed within NCC at the overall Program level (rather than at the individual project or organizational level), and is achieved by way of contributions from other levels of government and other conservation organizations, as well as through private-sector donations from foundations, corporations and individuals.

NCC is pleased to report that in the 2015-2016 period, NCC and its partners (OQOs and DUC) have matched the \$22.5M in Program funds with approximately \$72.2M in contributions to the Program from other sources (\$63.4M from NCC, and approximately \$6.3M from OQOs and \$2.5M from DUC), resulting in a match ratio of 3.21:1. This match ratio is higher than the 2.24:1 match ratio anticipated in the 2015-2016 Work Plan, which is a result of receiving larger donations of cash and land than expected at the time of the Work Plan. Of this \$72.2M in matching contributions, NCC, DUC, and OQOs were successful in raising \$5.6M in endowment capital from its donors across the country to finance stewardship endowment requirements for properties acquired under the Program. Landowners continue to be a significant source of matching contributions through donations of land, conservation agreements, and development rights. Matching contributions come from various sources, with approximately 47% coming from donations of land, conservation agreements, and development rights. The total match ratio incurred since inception of the Program is 2.76:1. NCC and partner organizations will continue to raise and contribute matching funds in order to continue to meet the overall 2:1 match requirement by the end of the Program. See Appendix 5 for a complete breakdown of total expenditures under the Program by expenditure category in the 2015-2016 period.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'land' refers to land, conservation agreements, and/or development rights.

<sup>6</sup> Also includes expenses related to the development or renewal of landscape level conservation plans.

<sup>7</sup> NCC incurred \$5,790 in Capacity Development expenses in the 2015-2016 period; however, these expenses are not considered Direct Program expenditures as per the Agreement.

<sup>8</sup> Appendix 1A records a total of \$21,327,381 in Direct Program Expenditures, as opposed to \$21,327,380 recorded in Table 2. This difference is due to rounding.

## **SECTION B - The Natural Areas Conservation Program – Program Deliverables**

This section of the report provides a summary of the Program results achieved by NCC and its partner organizations (DUC and OQOs) in the 2015-2016 period. In addition to conservation accomplishments, communication aspects of the Program and its accomplishments are also profiled herein as these media opportunities continue to be an important means by which the results of the Program are made known to the public.

### **5. Priority Natural Areas (PNAs)**

Since inception of the Program, conservation work has been focused within a select group of PNAs identified by NCC across the country.

A current list of NCC's 85 approved PNAs and DUC's 74 approved NAWMP Priority Areas is contained in Appendix 3A, and are also mapped in Appendix 3B and 3C respectively. There are no changes to the number of PNAs approved since the list of PNAs was last updated and approved in March 2016, but there has been a change to the name of one of the PNAs. OQOs continue to work within NCC's PNAs, DUC's NAWMP Priority Areas, or OQO-adopted Conservation Planning Frameworks.

### **6. Conservation Activities**

#### **6.1 Landscape Level Conservation Planning Results**

As per section 5(c)(i) of the Agreement, NCC is permitted to expense up to 2.5% (or approximately \$1.55M) in Program funds to complete landscape level conservation plans for NCC PNAs. In the 2015-2016 period, NCC expensed \$343,429 in Program funds to complete the renewal of 19 existing landscape-level conservation plans and four new landscape-level conservation plans. As of March 31, 2016, 81 of the 85 approved PNAs have corresponding landscape level conservation plans; the four remaining PNAs will have corresponding landscape level conservation plans developed in the 2016-2017 period.

#### **6.2 Land Securement Activity Results within PNAs, NAWMP Priority Areas and/or Conservation Planning Frameworks**

Within NCC, each proposed securement project is extensively reviewed in a Conservation Project Summary (CPS) to ensure that all NCC projects meet the requirements of the Program. Once approved, this initial property securement plan is further refined as the project moves forward to closing. This approval process provides clear and consistent decision making and ensures corporate accountability once a commitment has been made to a landowner.

In the 2015-2016 period, NCC secured 15,871 hectares of land within 38 PNAs, (965 hectares more than what was originally anticipated in the 2015-2016 Work Plan). Of

NCC's total hectares secured during the 2015-2016 period, 4,061 hectares were also Ecological Gifts under Environment and Climate Change Canada's Ecological Gifts Program. For further details regarding land securement activity results in the 2015-2016 period, see Appendix 4A.

DUC was also successful in securing 4,017 hectares of land within 12 NAWMP Priority Areas in the 2015-2016 period (3,747 hectares more than what was originally anticipated in DUC's 2015-2016 Work Plan). Of DUC's 4,017 hectares secured, 19 hectares were also Ecological Gifts under Environment and Climate Change Canada's Ecological Gifts Program. For further details regarding DUC's land securement activity results in the 2015-2016 period, see Appendix 4B.

Eleven projects were secured by eligible organizations under the first round of the OQO Program (launched in late July 2015), which resulted in the protection of 766 hectares of ecologically sensitive land. Of the 766 hectares acquired under the OQO Program, 482 hectares were Ecological Gifts under Environment and Climate Change Canada's Ecological Gifts Program. For further details regarding OQO's land securement activity results in the 2015-2016 period, see Appendix 4C.

Table 3 below provides a breakdown of hectares secured by both acquisition type and transaction type in the 2015-2016 period by all three organizations (NCC, DUC, and OQOs).

**Table 3:** Summary of Land Securement Activity by Acquisition Type in the 2015-2016 Period.

Org.	Fee Simple Ha.		Conservation Agreement Ha.		Other Development Rights Ha.		Total Ha.	Transactions
	P	D	P	D	P	D		
<b>NCC</b>	7,828	1,087	5,570	1,386	0	0	15,871	94
<b>DUC</b>	510	12	3,495	0	0	0	4,017	31
<b>OQO</b>	254	512	0	0	0	0	766	11
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8,592</b>	<b>1,611</b>	<b>9,065</b>	<b>1,386</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>20,654</b>	<b>136</b>

*P = Purchase; D = Donation*

### 6.3 Stewardship Implementation Actions (SIAs) by PNAs and NAWMP Priority Areas in the 2015-2016 Period.

An aim of the Program (Section 3(a) of the Agreement) is to implement Property Management Plan (PMP) actions on an estimated 120,000 hectares of fee simple land secured under the Program or Previous Program by NCC. NCC is pleased to report that in the 2015-2016 period, PMP actions were implemented on 136,259 hectares of fee simple land owned by NCC across 60 PNAs (101,641 more hectares than was anticipated in the 2015-2016 Work Plan). DUC implemented Management Plan activities on more the 12,881 hectares of land (within 26 NAWMP Priority Areas) secured under the Program or Previous Program on fee simple land owned by DUC (12,341 more hectares than was originally anticipated in the 2015-2016 Work Plan). Under Section 5(c)(iv) of the Agreement, OQOs are not awarded funds under the

Program for the purposes of implementing stewardship actions. For further details regarding the implementation of PMP actions and Management Plan activities by NCC and DUC in the 2015-2016 period, please see Appendix 4A and 4B respectively.

An additional aim under Section 3(b) of the Agreement is to complete, by the end of the Program, Conservation Agreement Compliance Monitoring on an estimated 100,000 hectares of land secured under the Program and Previous Program. In the 2015-2016 period, NCC successfully carried out Conservation Agreement Compliance Monitoring on more than 50,800 hectares of land (within 35 PNAs) secured by NCC under the Program and Previous Program (which is 7,641 hectares more than was originally anticipated in the 2015-2016 Work Plan). DUC also completed Conservation Agreement Compliance Monitoring on more than 8,383 hectares of land (within 10 NAWMP Priority Areas) secured under the Program or Previous Program, which is 8,113 hectares more than originally anticipated in the 2015-2016 Work Plan. Under Section 5(c)(iv) of the Agreement, OQOs are not awarded Program funds to complete Compliance Monitoring on Conservation Agreement properties. Please see Appendix 4A and 4B for more information regarding Conservation Agreement Compliance Monitoring completed in the 2015-2016 period.

#### 6.4 Species at Risk

As part of the implementation of Property Management Plans and general stewardship of NCC's protected lands, species identified to be at risk using various measurements remain an extremely important metric tracked by NCC and are reported under the Program. NCC first confirms species at risk that are known to exist on NCC properties. Identification and/or confirmation of species at risk occur prior to acquisition, during the Baseline Inventory, and through on-going monitoring of properties. NCC reviews reports from each region of the country based on calendar-dated information in order to identify species at risk<sup>9</sup> with confidence. With regards to NCC properties secured only in the 2015-2016 period, 26 COSEWIC-assessed species at risk were observed on 4,437 hectares of land; and 17 SARA listed (schedule 1) species at risk were observed on 4,313 hectares of land<sup>10</sup>. For NCC properties secured under the Program and Previous Program as of March 31, 2016, a total of 181 COSEWIC-assessed species at risk was identified on 307,573 hectares of land. Additionally, for NCC properties secured under the Program and Previous Program as of March 31, 2016, a total of 150 SARA listed species at risk was identified on 299,539 hectares of land secured by NCC<sup>11</sup>. This 2015-2016 Annual Progress Report shows a decrease in the number of COSEWIC-assessed and SARA listed species at

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<sup>9</sup> "Species at Risk" includes only species listed under SARA (schedule 1) or COSEWIC-assessed as Endangered, Threatened, or Special Concern on properties acquired under the Program or Previous Program.

<sup>10</sup> Species at risk observed on properties secured in the 2015-2016 fiscal year does not necessarily contribute to an increase in the overall total number of different species at risk observed on NCC properties, in part because the different species at risk observed on a property secured in 2015-2016 may have already been observed on properties secured previously under the Program or Previous Program (and, therefore, has already been accounted for in the total number of species at risk observed). If a species at risk was observed on property acquired prior to the 2015-2016 period, this could contribute to the change in total hectares.

<sup>11</sup> The hectares of land for which SARA listed species at risk had been observed are also accounted for in the hectares of land for which COSEWIC-assessed species at risk have been observed.

risk previously reported in the 2014-2015 Annual Progress Report. This decrease is a result of a tracking adjustment made to report only species at risk observed on properties acquired under the Program and Previous Program, and not on NCC's portfolio as a whole.

DUC focuses securement, restoration, and management activities on wetland and upland habitats, which provide important breeding, foraging, resting, brood rearing and migratory/stopover locations for many species including at-risk and vulnerable species. As part of reporting on habitat securement under the Program, DUC assesses the number of COSEWIC-assessed and SARA listed species (restricted to birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles) that potentially occur on DUC secured, restored and managed lands based on the best available species range maps based on data from Birdlife International for birds, and NatureServe for other species. DUC does not conduct property specific surveys of COSEWIC- assessed and SARA listed species.

OQOs do not report species at risk information for properties acquired under the OQO Program.

## **7. Communications Activities**

In the 2015-2016 Work Plan, NCC anticipated the completion of 67 communication activities and DUC anticipated the completion of 9 communication activities. Communication activities for OQO are not anticipated in the Work Plan. In the 2015-2016 period, NCC was successful in completing 42 communication activities and DUC was successful in completing 8 communication activities. OQOs completed 14 communication activities in the 2015-2016 period. Further details pertaining to NCC, DUC and OQO communication activities are shown in Appendix 6. NCC was unable to achieve the planned 67 communication activities in the 2015-2016 period in part as a result of the requirement to cease activities from the time the writ dropped (August 2, 2015) up until the election date (October 19, 2015). Subsequently, NCC was advised to halt communication activities until the new Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada and staff were briefed on the Program.

### **7.1 Communications with Government Stakeholders.**

To support its government stakeholders, NCC's activities have focused on informing Members of Parliament (MPs) of conserved properties in their ridings and building awareness of the Natural Areas Conservation Program among Parliamentarians.

Notification letters were sent to specific Members of Parliament (MPs) informing them of newly conserved properties in their federal ridings. Over the course of the 2015-2016 period, NCC received correspondence from ten MPs who inquired about conserved properties in their ridings. These inquiries were responded to promptly.

In addition, a full-colour Annual Impact Report, which outlines the Program's cumulative results and regional stories since inception, was prepared during the 2015-2016 period and will be ready for distribution in the 2016-2017 period.

## 7.2 Project Announcements.

Fourteen projects were announced during the 2015-2016 period. Local Members of Parliament (including one Cabinet Minister) participated in-person in several project announcements. Quotes from the Minister of Environment and Climate Change and local MPs were also provided by the federal government for news releases relating to property announcements.

These announcements provided an opportunity for significant media outreach and public awareness building of the Natural Areas Conservation Program.

## 7.3 General NACP Awareness.

Aside from property announcements, NCC has generated exposure by placing stories that promote the cumulative impact of the Program on our corporate website, in donor-focused publications, and in traditional and social media. In particular, NCC is very active in the social media space and has ensured virtual word-of-mouth recognition of the Program. NCC has over 96,000 followers on Facebook and over 30,000 on Twitter.

NCC's corporate website (English and French), which includes a large section dedicated to the Program, now incorporates the new Environment and Climate Change Canada logo on both the home page and program-specific pages.

NCC produced and placed a half-page full-colour print advertisement in *The Hill Times* on December 7, 2015, designed to generate awareness of the Program. This advertisement recognized the Program through a link to the program's description on NCC's website.

NCC continues to promote the Program in general to the public through media relations, as well as in NCC's own donor-focused publications. The Program has been profiled in NCC's internal and external publications, including NCC's *Annual Report*.

## **8. Capacity Development**

NCC is permitted to expense up to a maximum of 1.5% (\$75,000) of its Program Coordination allocation (as per Section 5(c)(vii) of the Agreement) to complete an assessment of NCC's standards and practices against the Canadian Land Trusts Standards and Practices (CLT S&Ps), determine areas of improvement, and take necessary action to increase compliance against the CLT S&Ps. In the 2015-2016 period alone, \$5,790 of the permitted \$75,000 has been expensed by NCC for the purpose of creating and drafting a project plan, preparing a project team, and reviewing necessary criteria to undertake the assessment project.

DUC is also permitted under the Program to expense up to a maximum of 1.5% (\$75,000) of its \$5M allocation on developing capacity and adhering to the CLT S&Ps. In the 2015-2016 period, DUC expensed \$14,778 in Program Funds to increase compliance with Standard 7 (Volunteers, Staff, and Consultants) – Practice G (Compensation and Benefits) of the CLT S&Ps.

OQOs are also permitted to expense up to 2.5% (\$125,000) of the OQO allocation (\$5M) under the Program to increase compliance with the CLT S&Ps. Therefore, in April 2016, NCC will launch the first round of the OQO Capacity Development Funding Program, which provides financial assistance to eligible organization to makes improvements to a subset of practices selected from the CLT S&Ps.

## **9. Conclusion**

In reviewing the conservation results achieved by NCC and its partners (DUC and OQOs) under the auspices of this unique public-private partnership program, it is clear that much has been achieved as of the second year of the Agreement. Between September 11, 2014 and March 31, 2016, over 25,000 hectares of land have been protected by NCC and partner organizations (DUC and OQOs) through land securement activities and these lands are being managed for their best conservation outcomes. Property Management Plan actions and Management Plan activities have been implemented on more than 149,000 hectares secured by both NCC and DUC under the Program and Previous Program in order to restore property and negate threats. Additionally, Conservation Agreement Compliance Monitoring has been completed on more than 59,000 hectares by both NCC and DUC on properties secured under the Program and Previous Program to monitor restrictions and conservation purposes.

The OQO Program continues to be a successful achievement under the Natural Areas Conservation Program. NCC received 19 application forms in total, and the OQO Program was over-subscribed by approximately \$1.25M in the 2015-2016 period. The OQO Program effectively provided financial support to 11 eligible conservation organizations to acquire ecologically sensitive land, contributing 766 hectares of conservation land to the overall Program as of March 31, 2016.

NCC also continues to make every effort to ensure the Program is recognized publicly for the on-the-ground results that have been achieved. The Program will continue to focus on securement activities within PNAs, NAWMP Priority Areas, and Conservation Planning Frameworks, already identified as critically important to the conservation of Canada's biodiversity, through to the end of the Program (March 31, 2019). The use of public monies to directly acquire and steward some of the most ecologically important and at-risk lands across the country has proven to be a valuable tool for conservation.