



MEMO / NOTE DE SERVICE

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TO: Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee

DESTINATAIRE : Comité de l'agriculture et des affaires rurales

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SUBJECT: Living Snow Fence Pilot Program

OBJET : Programme pilote de pare-neiges vivants

PURPOSE

The purpose of this memo is to provide an update to the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee and Council on the Living Snow Fence Pilot Program as directed by Council in June 2024.

BACKGROUND

On June 12, 2024, City Council approved a motion to direct staff to engage with the RVCA, and other conservation authorities, to design a living snow fence grant program

for rural Ottawa on a pilot basis ([ACS2024-OCC-CCS-0060](#)). The design of the pilot program included considerations for:

- Site specific planting plans for trees and shrubs, based on site conditions appropriate setback distances from roads, and in consultation with landowners
- Planting, maintenance requirements, survival assessments, and refill planting as needed
- Incentive payments to compensate landowners for the loss of productive land and,
- Initial funding to be drawn from existing funding under the Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program

Prior to pilot program implementation, staff were directed to survey how other municipalities operate similar programs, to use those lessons when designing the pilot and to engage with a range of governmental and non-governmental partners to secure additional funding for the program. Staff were further directed to report back to Council, through the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, on lessons learned from the pilot and to recommend whether the living snow fence pilot program should be expanded into a permanent City program.

DISCUSSION

Due to the timespan required to establish living snow fences consisting of trees and/or shrubs, staff propose to report on the outcomes of the pilot in two phases. Phase 1 is related to site identification and design, and key measures for success involve landowner engagement (relative to outreach efforts) and participation (number of pilot sites identified). Phase 2 is related to site establishment (e.g., length of snow fences, planted area) and longer-term monitoring (e.g., survival rates, impact on road conditions). This current memo is intended to address Phase 1 activities and outcomes.

Pilot Program Design

RVCA Forestry staff, in consultation with City staff and other conservation authorities, designed a living snow fence pilot with three options featuring different configurations of trees and/or shrubs. These design options followed best practices established by other municipalities and conservation authorities in various jurisdictions across Ontario. Upon identification of a pilot site, a site visit will take place and a planting plan will be developed in consultation with the landowner. Planting plans will consider soil type, desired fence porosity, tile drainage, salt spray, distance to road, and prevailing wind direction. Pilot sites will then be prepared, planted, and maintained by RVCA staff.

Living snow fences are eligible for survival assessments, refill planting, and tending for a five-year period.

Landowners participating in the pilot program will receive a land retirement incentive payment of \$700/acre/year for a minimum period of 10 years. The incentive payment is intended to compensate landowners for the loss of productive land and to encourage the establishment of living snow fences on private land. Landowners are required to sign an agreement to keep the living snow fence in place for a minimum of 10 years and to grant access to the conservation authority for project establishment, maintenance, and survival assessments. The costs associated with establishing and maintaining the plantings are 100 per cent covered by the pilot program, with an expected maximum of \$15,000 per property (in addition to the annual incentive payment).

Funding Framework

Initial funding for the living snow fence pilot program will be drawn from the Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program's (ORCWP) existing budget. The ORCWP is a City-funded program administered by local conservation authorities, and the program already offers grants to rural landowners for stewardship projects such as fragile land retirement and windbreaks.

Other rural land stewardship programs operating in eastern Ontario include Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) and the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association's Resilient Agricultural Landscape Program (RALP). Staff from local conservation authorities are well-connected to both ALUS and RALP and serve as program coordinators and administrators. ALUS and RALP offer funding to farmers for tree and shrub planting projects, and there is the potential for this funding to be leveraged to specifically support the establishment of living snow fences. To be eligible for these funding streams, the applicant must have a valid farm business registration number.

Conservation authority staff have cautioned that funding sources and guidelines for ALUS are constantly changing, and it can be challenging to match funding with other stewardship programs. Stacking funding from various sources is best achieved on a case-by-case basis, and conservation authority staff are willing to help landowners navigate the application process.

Promotion and Communications

Local landowners were encouraged to participate in the living snow fence pilot program through promotional materials that were distributed in the spring of 2025. Subscribers to

Councillor Brown's Ward 21 Newsletter were sent an email message with information on the pilot program and inviting participation. Promotion was also done through Councillor Brown's and RVCA's social media channels, RVCA's website, and at a local event attended by RVCA staff.

Pilot Program Uptake

Communications from Councillor Brown's office were the most effective in generating interest in the living snow fence pilot program. Thirteen landowners contacted RVCA staff regarding the pilot program, and all expressed positive interest and support for the program.

Based on a high-level screening of the initial thirteen properties, seven were deemed to be unsuitable for a living snow fence for various reasons. These sites were often located on the wrong side of the road or in areas with limited potential to reduce snow drifting. Other sites were already forested, or landowners were more interested in landscaping or privacy screening.

Site visits were completed by RVCA staff at six suitable properties. Of these sites, one was unable to proceed due to restrictions in a lease agreement. Another farmer was very supportive of the concept but identified significant challenges with the required setbacks in terms of access and herbicide drift. A third property was residential, and the size of the setback between the living snow fence and the road was unappealing to the landowner. The remaining three sites are currently planning to proceed with planting a living snow fence in spring 2026.

Lessons Learned

RVCA staff have identified several important lessons learned, mainly related to planting plans and motivational factors, through this initial phase of the living snow fence pilot program. At this time, it is not possible to share lessons learned from the establishment and longer-term monitoring of the living snow fences, as the first pilot sites are expected to be planted in spring 2026.

There is a need for the planting plans to be flexible, and it is often necessary to compromise to obtain projects that benefit both landowner and reduce drifting snow. Optimal setbacks are a limiting factor, and setback distances should be flexible based on the snow load potential and adjacent land uses. Every landowner that was involved with this pilot was interested in a slightly modified plan for their property. A program with

a “one size fits all” approach to planting plans is not useful and may make it more difficult to generate interest and uptake.

The desire to improve local roads in the winter was a key motivating factor for landowners. RVCA staff found that simply speaking about issues with local snow drifts and asking landowners if they would be interested in being part of the solution resonated the most and encouraged participation.

Financial compensation was not a high priority, and one landowner even preferred to keep the money in the program and not receive payments. Cost and maintenance concerns were not issues for landowners. There was limited interest from landowners with cash crop operations; all projects that are planning to proceed are located in hayfields.

The opportunity for matching funds with other stewardship programs, such as ALUS and RALP, is available but needs to be considered on a project-by-project basis. Local conservation authority staff are well-informed on application processes for other forms of stewardship funding and will help interested and eligible landowners to apply. As ALUS and RALP funding is only available to those with a farm business registration number, the ORCWP is well-positioned to offer funding to rural non-farm landowners and fill this gap.

CONCLUSION

While the living snow fence pilot program was positively received by rural landowners and generated some interest and participation, the demand for this initiative is not high enough to justify establishing a stand-alone program at this time.

The Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program is well-positioned to include living snow fences as a new project type within its existing framework. A five-year review of the ORCWP is currently underway by staff in the Strategic Initiatives Department. Recommendations for a renewed program, including new project types, will be brought to Committee and Council in Q1 2026. A recommendation to include living snow fences as a new project type will be included in the 5-year program review.

It will be important to continue observing and reporting on the next phase of the living snow fence projects, including site establishment and longer-term monitoring. Staff will include regular updates to Committee and Council in the ORCWP annual reports and will provide a fulsome review of living snow fence projects in the next 5-year program review anticipated in 2031.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications at this time. The initial funding for this pilot project will be drawn from the existing funding under the Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program. The financial implications of adding living snow fences as a new project type under the Ottawa Rural Clean Water Program will be assessed and reported through the 5-year review to be brought to Committee and Council in Q1 2026. If applicable, any additional funding requirements will be presented to Council for approval in fall 2026 and as part of the 2027 City Budget process.

ASSET MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

There are no asset management implications.

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SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

N/A