



GRAND Actions

The Grand River watershed newsletter



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Cover photo

GRCA arborists have the challenging and sometimes dangerous task of removing ash trees from the forests.

Photo by Dave Cooke



EAB is a biological storm across our watershed

By Janet Baine

GRCA Communications Specialist

In the splendor of the Grand River forests, a biological storm has hit. Ash trees are being attacked by the voracious Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) insect and some forests are now at peak mortality, which means that most of the ash trees are either dead or dying.

The disease doesn't hit like a wave, but in pockets. Some parts of a forest are at peak mortality, but other areas nearby are a year or more behind.

The GRCA manages 115 square kilometres (30,000 acres) of forests, leaving the forestry staff in the midst of a big transformation.

"At first you think you can just absorb the EAB impact," explains GRCA Superintendent of Arboriculture Stephen McQuigge. "Then you turn around, and everywhere you look, there are dead ash trees. It started with two to three trees here and there, and then it is in the thousands. You can understand that intellectually, but when it happens and you see peak mortality, it is astonishing. We are getting to that point now in some areas."

Fortunately, the GRCA budgeted \$400,000 a year for 10 years to deal with EAB, starting in 2014. A portion of this money is used for monitoring the insects, doing a tree inventory and injecting 200 ash trees with a bioinsecticide to keep a few trees alive, as well as some replanting. But the biggest chunk of the EAB budget is for



removing trees to keep people safe and protect property in GRCA parks, conservation areas and along trails.

Fortunately, only six per cent of the trees in the GRCA's forests are ash trees, but some stands of trees are 50 to 60 per cent ash. The hardest hit areas so far are in Brant County and at Byng Island, but Elora Gorge is also getting close to peak mortality and many other locations are not far behind, McQuigge said.

Day in and day out, GRCA arborists are in the forests taking down ash trees — work that none of them ever

wanted to do. Their goal is to remove the trees that could fall on someone or damage a nearby structure — what they call hazard tree management. The arborists work in areas where people enjoy nature, such as along the trails and tracts that are open to the public, as well as within Grand River Parks and near nature centres. For the most part, the trees they have cut down are left in place to provide habitat as they decompose and send nutrients out into the forest.

Trail users astonished

Occasionally, trail users are astonished to see what is happening, because the problem of ash trees is not well understood. It can appear that the arborists have become carried away and are taking down too many ash trees too soon — including trees that still have some green leaves. This is hard for any tree lover to witness.

While the tree may look sound, the root system and base of the tree can be severely decayed and unstable, because EAB causes the roots and trunk to rot. McQuigge said that the safety of the arborists is also an important consideration in deciding when to remove a tree. He and his team are struggling to keep up, so the GRCA has hired private contractors to do some of the EAB work.

In contrast, some elm trees that died from Dutch elm disease decades ago are still standing firm, because that disease did not

impact the stability of the tree to the same degree. Dead elms can be left standing, but ash trees near trails and other public areas must be removed.

“No one on my crew got into arboriculture

because we hate trees and want to take them down. This is soul destroying work. We'd much rather be doing preventative maintenance,”

McQuigge said. “But, this is where we are and what we are going to be doing for the next 10 years.”

The dying ash trees are noticeable now and will be for years to come. The downed ash

trees on the forest floor will change the look of some forests where there are trails.

However, many areas with ash trees will remain untouched, because not all GRCA land is open to the public and there are no trails in many forested areas.

“If there is a silver lining to all of this, it is that people are starting to care more about trees, rather than see them as a renewable resource that will always be there,” McQuigge said.

Tree fact

Researchers such as University of British Columbia's Suzanne Simard have found that dying trees help to build the forest community as they die.

They send out nutrients and even information through an underground biological network to other trees of other species. In this way, the forest behaves like a single living organism, or people communicating through the Internet.

Please stay safe in forests

The GRCA forestry staff appreciate the co-operation of visitors to GRCA properties and want to ensure their safety.

Please respect yellow and black warning tape, fencing and signs that indicate the need to stay away from certain areas and recognize that some properties do not have trails and are not available to visitors.

Temporary signs and barriers are in place to warn people about the potential danger. These signs could mean:

- A forestry crew is working near the trail removing trees nearby.
- The crew is busy working elsewhere and has not yet come to remove a potentially hazardous tree.
- Thirdly, work on a hazardous tree has been delayed until after nesting birds have fledged from the area.

Please stay on trails when you are enjoying nature within the Grand River watershed — as hazard ash trees close to trails are being removed, but not ash trees in areas that are closed to the public.

Some personal responsibility is involved with being outdoors, just as there is with driving a car. If you move off of a trail, or are in the woods after a wind storm, look up and around to check for trees and branches that are unstable.



Photo by Todd Fritze

Please pay close attention to signs and yellow and black tape in our forests.

Saving some ash

In 2014, GRCA Forester Ron Wu-Winter selected about 200 ash trees and began treating them with a bioinsecticide to save them.

They are injected around the trunk every two years for 10 years. The good news is that so far, none of these trees have been lost, but this can still change.

It is important to start the injections early in the disease cycle to give the trees the best chance of survival. The injections may have started a year or two late for some trees, but most will do well. For more information about his technique, see the July-August 2014 issue of Grand Actions.

Wu-Winter said some replanting in areas where ash trees have been removed started this spring, but this is expensive and progress will be slow.

Marilyn Murray receives top GRCA award

Marilyn Murray has been a driving force at the Grand River Conservation Foundation for more than three decades and she received the top award given out by the GRCA — the 2017 Honour Roll Award.

This award was given out at the GRCA's 2017 Watershed Awards event, held October 19.

Murray's connection to the conservation authority runs deep. During the 1970s, she and her husband Doug Robinson, who has since passed away, made a series of films about agriculture and natural resources, including several about the GRCA.

One of their films, *One Day in May*, involved aerial footage of the big flood on the Grand River in 1974. This movie is still used today by teachers at all levels, and the footage was also used during the provincial inquiry into that flood.

"Because of this background, I have a deep appreciation for the many aspects of the work done by the GRCA. It has inspired my commitment to the Foundation," she said. "Volunteering for me is doing something you love for a cause you believe in."



Marilyn Murray has been a dedicated volunteer with the GRCF for 30 years.

WATERSHED AWARDS

Murray joined the Foundation board in 1986 and has played an active role in every major initiative of the Foundation since that time. She was working at the University of Guelph, and when she retired in 1996, she was the Director of Donor Relations. She jumped on board at the GRCF to assist with Rails to Trails, which raised \$1.5 million to purchase 77 km of railway lines and converted them to trails along the Grand River.

In 1996, she married Ken Murray and they have both generously contributed to many causes, especially the Foundation. She served as Foundation Chair from 1997 to 2000 and later became the founding chair of the Foundation's Grand Champions program, which has strengthened ties with community volunteers across the watershed.

A lookout on the Speed River just behind the River Run Centre in Guelph, the Marilyn Murray Riverview, was named in her honour in 2007. The lookout is on the Alf Hales Trail along the Speed River, which the Foundation constructed.

"No one else has contributed as significantly over such a long period of time to the Foundation's success," said Sara Wilbur, Executive Director of the Foundation. "We have been a very significant beneficiary of her efforts. Her involvement extends far beyond her own personal giving."

Connecting kids to the outdoors

Murray led the Living Classroom campaign, which got underway in 2002 and raised \$2.5 million to bring school children to nature centres operated by the GRCA. This campaign was essential because it allowed thousands of students to continue in programs during a time when there was no provincial funding for outdoor education. Without the funds raised in the campaign, many watershed school boards would not have been able to send classes to the nature centres. Many upgrades to nature centre facilities and trails were also made possible with donations.

Since then, ensuring that children connect with nature has been very close to Murray's heart, and she is pleased to have helped private donors to step up and fill an education gap. This is where she continues to focus her volunteer work for the Foundation, as a member of the fundraising committee for the new Guelph Lake Nature Centre.

"During the years I have been involved with the Foundation, it has become an integral part of the GRCA culture," Murray explained. "We are providing significant funding for projects throughout the watershed that would not otherwise be possible. The campaign for a new Guelph Lake Nature Centre is an example. Without financial support from individuals, companies and organizations in the Guelph community, this new facility and its surrounding learning grounds would not be possible."

The learning grounds for the new nature centre have been developed and fundraising for the new building is underway.

"Marilyn is a major reason why the GRCA and GRCF are well known in the philanthropic community in Guelph and beyond," Wilbur said.

Stuart Wright receives award

Stuart Wright is helping his peers across the province to find and adopt practices that are in tune with the environment and improve water quality.

He has received a 2017 Watershed Award from the GRCA for his work in supporting local chapters of the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA).

Wright and his extended family at Wrythaven Farms in Kenilworth, north of Arthur, have worked on many conservation projects on their farm over the past 15 years. Along with his two brothers, Lloyd and Mark, and his son, Andrew, he runs a 435-hectare (1,150-acre) dairy and cash crop farm. They grow corn, wheat and soybeans on land they own and rent. Stuart runs the field operations, while his brothers and son look after the 65 dairy cattle.



Photo by Janet Baine

Stuart Wright checks a field on his farm in Wellington County. He received a 2017 Watershed Award from the GRCA for his work helping other farmers in the province.

Their environmental projects include no-till planting, manure storage facilities and many years of using cover crops. The land has been in their family for four generations, and they don't want the soil to degrade.

"A lot of people are passionate about soil health. It's the source of what we eat, as well as non-food items like cotton and soy products, including car parts and ink. Soil degradation is happening. It is an issue and we have to devote ourselves to finding ways to step in," he said.

In 2000, Wright won the provincial Forage Master competition for the quality of forage he was growing. To win the award, a Forage Master not only grows great forage, but also presents innovative ideas and forage techniques to peers.

"Forage is important. It's a perennial crop that is good for soil, because it has good root penetration," he said. Forage provides ground cover throughout the year and also holds carbon dioxide in the ground, which is important in this era of climate change.

Wright was asked to be a director of the Wellington SCIA in 2001 and he later became president. Now he is on the provincial executive of the OSCIA. This organization brings environmental and business programs, such as the Grasslands Habitat Program and the Species at Risk funding, to farmers across the province. It

also provides farm tours and workshops. GRCA staff often sponsor or provide presentations at OSCIA meetings, where there is a natural connection.

Good for water quality

What is good for soil health and resilience is also good for water quality and farmers. It's in a farmer's best interests to keep soil and phosphorus, an important crop nutrient, on the land instead of washing into watercourses due to heavy rainfall.

Managing crops and soil used to be more straightforward, but that is changing, Wright said. Less predictable weather patterns combined with invasive plants and pests always bring new challenges, he added.

"Stuart's outstanding contribution has been his leadership as a provincial director in the OSCIA," said Anne Loeffler, Conservation Specialist with the GRCA, and his nominator. "As provincial director, he has played a significant role in the rebirth of the Waterloo SCIA. This local organization had become inactive in recent decades, but Stuart successfully encouraged young local growers to bring it back to life in 2015. Now the Waterloo SCIA is a resource to local producers, providing a network promoting stewardship and crop production through meetings and local field events."

In addition to revitalizing the Waterloo association, Wright also supports and encourages the Wellington, Perth and Huron SCIAs.

Please note that stories about each of the four other 2017 Watershed Award recipients will appear in future issues of Grand Actions.

TAKING ACTION

Federal funding for two programs

On behalf of the Honourable Catherine McKenna, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Cambridge MP Bryan May announced two grants for the GRCA in November.

Funding of \$189,000 will help private landowners improve water quality and habitat conditions for several aquatic species at risk in the Grand River watershed.

"We are thrilled to receive this funding support for the next three years," said Louise Heyming, Supervisor of Conservation Outreach at the GRCA. "These funds will be made available to landowners who are completing projects to improve water quality and aquatic habitat on their property".

The Grand River is identified as a regional priority watershed for this funding from the Habitat Stewardship Program - Species at Risk.

Help landowners take action

The greatest threat to the survival of aquatic species at risk in the Grand River watershed is related to habitat loss from increases in nutrients and sediment in waterways.

These funds will help landowners to establish vegetated buffers along streams, address erosion issues and undertake other projects to benefit water quality. Landowners will be offered assistance in planning their projects and cost share funding to help implement them. The grant also includes support for community volunteers to get involved in planting riparian buffers.

Stewardship programs that improve aquatic habitat are identified as recovery measures in the Recovery Strategies and Action Plans for several species.



Photo by Crystal Allan

Wavy-rayed lampmussel is a species at risk that lives in the Grand River.

The grant will also help raise awareness of targeted species at risk through workshops. For more information contact ruralwater@grandriver.ca.

\$40,000 for water management

The GRCA is also receiving \$40,000 through the Lake Erie Lakewide Action and Management Plan (LAMP).

This funding continues to support implementation of the Grand River watershed Water Management Plan (WMP), a voluntary joint action plan that aligns water management efforts with the shared vision of 16 partners.

The finding will provide:

1. Continued support for the Grand River Watershed-wide Wastewater Optimization program. This program focuses on peer-to-peer learning to reduce wastewater phosphorus loads to Lake Erie.
2. Support staff to explore water quality data in the southern Grand River and how the Grand River may impact Lake Erie.
3. To provide the opportunity to explore novel approaches, in partnership with the University of Waterloo, to assess streambank erosion and its contribution to phosphorus in the southern Grand.

Students help to control invasive phragmites at Taquanyah

It was a tall order, but Grade 11 students from Waterford District High School were up to the challenge.

They played an essential role in carrying out the first phase of a three-year plan to control phragmites at Taquanyah Conservation Area, west of Cayuga.

Phragmites, also known as European common reed, is a tall grass with a fluffy seed head. It grows densely and can reach six metres tall, out-competing native plants for water and nutrients.

While phragmites is a problem throughout the province, it is a big issue at Taquanyah, which is one of only two locations in Ontario where an endangered plant, Virginia mallow, grows. Controlling phragmites will ensure that the Virginia mallow will continue to thrive in Taquanyah.

The class of Specialist High Skills Major students used a spading technique for the phragmites that is growing close to the Virginia mallow. They also created a healthy five-metre buffer between the phragmites

and the Virginia mallow, by removing the invasive phragmites at this location.

After the students have done this work, a licensed pesticide applicator applies the herbicide glyphosate, which is better known by the trade name Roundup. A machine with the name Phrag'n Slayer painted on the front carried out this part of the task in another area of Taquanyah this year.

Only a small part of the area near Mill Creek has been treated so far, but the treated area will be expanded during the next two years. The phragmites management plan for Taquanyah was developed in 2015, when the reed was found on 21 per cent of the 65-hectare property.

The overall goal is not to eliminate phragmites, which would be too difficult, but to control it in specific areas.

At other GRCA locations, such as Snyder's Flats and Luther Marsh, the GRCA is striving to control phragmites before it becomes well established.



Photos by Lindsay Campbell

High school students removed phragmites (tall plant at left with fluffy seed head) at Taquanyah. Inset, a machine aptly named a Phrag'n Slayer was used to remove the phragmites in a different area of Taquanyah.



Jeff Holmes in Dufferin County planted this living snow fence that will help keep drivers safe. The trees will grow to prevent drifting on the road during winter (see inset).

Living snow fences save lives

You may not notice living snow fences along rural roads, but these may save your life someday.

Generous landowners like Jeff Holmes are installing these “fences,” which are made up of rows of trees set back from the road.

“Trees reduce risk of snow cover and whiteouts on the nearby roads,” Holmes explains. He lives in Dufferin County, in the northern part of the Grand River watershed, where hazardous winter storms and snow squalls are common.

Holmes is a strong advocate for planting trees to help reduce whiteout conditions and improve driving visibility. He also sees the benefit of these windbreaks for his land, because they provide shelter to his fields.

There is science behind the design of a living snow fence. Tree placement is based on many variables, including prevailing wind direction, road setbacks, existing hydro lines and minimizing the loss of productive crop land.

Spruce trees preferred

Spruce trees are often chosen because their tall, dense, evergreen foliage calms wind better than other tree species. Ideal placement of a living snow fence is 30 to 50 metres back from the road, to allow snow to

settle on the lee side of the trees, instead of on the road. The final setback is designed to accommodate the landowner’s field equipment, leaving enough space between the trees and the road to continue planting crops.

“It is an act of generosity to plant a living snow fence, and it could really make a difference by saving someone’s life,” said GRCA Forestry Specialist Jessica Robbins. Assistance in designing a living snow fence on your rural property is available through the GRCA. There are also funding programs to help offset the cost of these projects. Three municipalities — Wellington, Dufferin and Haldimand — cover 100 per cent of the costs of installing a living snow fence, with additional payments for land taken out of production.

Learn more

If you are interested in learning more, call 519-621-2761 and ask for a forestry specialist, or email trees@grandriver.ca. GRCA staff will make arrangements to visit your property and lead you through the process of planting a living snow fence that could be in place next spring. This is one of many types of tree planting projects available through the GRCA.

Young entomologist

Grade 9 student Jeff Grant loves butterflies and has a special fondness for Monarchs that he brings to his volunteer work at Laurel Creek Nature Centre.

Grant knows that several factors are leading to the decline of Monarchs. One local concern is the disappearance of their host plant — milkweed — the only plant they can lay their eggs on, because it is the only plant Monarch caterpillars can eat.

To contribute to Monarch conservation, Grant planted milkweed and raises hundreds caterpillars on these plants at his family’s farm each year. After seeing 1,000 milkweed plants in his township destroyed, he decided to educate people about the plant. Among his many contributions to Monarch education is his commitment to volunteer and inspire children of all ages to learn about butterflies at the nature centre.

Grant has improved the nature centre pollinator garden with corporate volunteer groups from Economical and Canon Canada. He also inspired these adults by speaking with them about how they can create habitat for butterflies on their own properties. He was interviewed on the Weather Network and has spoken at GRCA park programs to educate people about the importance of milkweed and other flowers for Monarch survival.

“No matter their age, passionate caring volunteers like Jeff make a difference in our watershed,” said GRCA Volunteer Coordinator Bronwen Buck. She noted that fostering the interests of young people is also an example of the great work being done by nature centre staff.



Photo by Bronwen Buck

Jeff Grant is an enthusiastic volunteer.

FOUNDATION

Help complete FWR Dickson update

Since August, the GRCA has been working to improve accessibility at the FWR Dickson Wilderness Area near Ayr thanks to fundraising by the GRCF.

Major construction is underway as trail and boardwalk improvements are made on the property. A replacement boardwalk with a lookout is being constructed, along with an accessible trail from the south end. This includes retaining walls to ensure that the slope is gentle enough for strollers and people with mobility issues. A replacement footbridge is under construction as well.

The goal is to create a central destination for bird feeding and wildlife viewing that is accessible to everyone. This work is part of a wilderness trail that allows visitors to walk north past Wrigley's Lake to Bannister Lake. The construction will be completed by the end of March 2018.

For people in Waterloo Region and Brant County, the delicate touch of a chickadee is available along this trail and there is no cost to park and walk the 4.8 km trails. The area will be closed until this phase of work is complete.

To date, almost \$195,000 has been raised from the Canada 150 Community Infrastructure Program and donors such as The Cowan Foundation, TD Friends of the



Photo by Paul Lucier

Work to improve accessibility at FWR Dickson is underway this winter.



John and Elinor Heuton with GRCA Board Chair Helen Jowett (at right) at the unveiling of a commemorative rock that has been installed at Dumfries Conservation Area.

Environment Foundation and Ayr Farmers Mutual. About \$20,000 is still needed to complete this work. Donations can be made online at www.grcf.ca or by contacting Sara Wilbur at 519-621-2763 ext. 2272, or by email at swilbur@grandriver.ca.

Percy Hilborn remembered

Fifty years ago Percy Hilborn donated 75 hectares of farmland that is now a park in the heart of Cambridge.

To remember Hilborn's generosity, a large stone was placed in a newly created sitting area in Dumfries Conservation Area this fall at a gathering organized by the Grand River Conservation Foundation.

"My father was an environmentalist long before his time," said Percy's daughter, Elinor Hueton. "He wanted to preserve some untouched green space in the heart of the city in which people could relax and enjoy nature."

Two benches, donated by BWXT (formerly Babcock and Wilcox), are near the commemorative rock, creating a sitting area with native plants and shrubs. Entry to the park is off of Dunbar Road, west of Hespeler Road.

While development now surrounds the park, it remains a tranquil oasis in the city that has been well supported by

organizations such as BWXT and the local Rotary Clubs.

Percy R. Hilborn (1886-1972) was a successful businessman. Between 1915 and 1967 he purchased farms where he planted thousands of evergreens and constructed two ponds.

The land was donated and is now Dumfries Conservation Area in Cambridge. Two of his children, Elinor Heuton and John Hilborn, were joined with many family members and Friends of Dumfries to unveil a commemorative rock.

"This is a gem in the heart of the city, and it is sometimes referred to as the Central Park of Cambridge," noted GRCA Chair Helen Jowett, who also represents Cambridge as a Waterloo Regional Councillor. She commended Percy and the Hilborn family for this important contribution to the community, and also thanked GRCA staff who designed and constructed the special sitting area.

The park has more than four kilometres of trails and natural and plantation forests, as well as ponds. In recent years, the City of Cambridge and the GRCA have enlisted the help of residents at special events to remove invasive plants and plant native Carolinian trees and shrubs.

The Huetons thought it was especially fitting to remember Percy 50 years after he made the donation and for Canada 150, to commemorate the creation of Canada in 1867.



New six-week GRCA program for wee ones

The GRCA has set out in a new direction by offering a successful outdoor exploration program for preschool children.

As soon as the pilot Wild Wee Ones fall program at Shade's Mills Park ended, a second six-week session got underway. Plans are in the works to offer the program at other GRCA nature centres starting early in 2018.

The Wild Wee Ones program brings nature-based education, which has long been provided to school children by the GRCA, to younger kids. The classroom is the earth, the trees, the creek and fields. The group meets outside and stays outside.

Each morning is greeted with a welcome of each other and gratitude for the day. Through playing games and discovering together, the young explorers are challenged to go beyond the familiar. They learn to focus their attention, to ask why, to work together and to develop inquisitive confidence.

"We provide a nurturing learning environment for parents/guardians and their young explorers. Our program leaders allow the children's natural curiosity to guide the children in both nature-based play and discovery. Children have an uninhibited approach to interacting with the world, and playing is the core method for learning. We

help parents and children become comfortable playing in and exploring the outdoors," said Tracey Ryan, Manager of Environmental Education and Restoration at the GRCA.



Keep an eye out for a new nature centre for preschool students.

Multiple research studies have proven that connecting with nature is beneficial to people of all ages in many ways, but especially for very young children. Not only does it improve their mental and physical health, but it can be the start to a life-long understanding that will help them grow into stewards of the land, which is important. As the saying goes, we protect what we care about.

This program is ideal for parents or guardians, who are looking for ways to connect their children with nature and the outdoors at an early age. Register online at www.grandriver.eventbrite.ca.

About Grand Actions:

This newsletter is produced several times a year by the Grand River Conservation Authority.

More information:

Current and back issues as well as complete subscription information is available online at www.grandriver.ca/GrandActions.

Submission deadlines:

The 15th of February, April, June, August, October and December. Submissions may be edited for length or style. Photos and event information is also welcome. We do our best to publish items, but we are not able to guarantee publication.

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100%

THE GRAND CALENDAR

Give Grand before Dec. 18

Please consider making a donation to the Grand River Conservation Foundation before December 18 to receive a letter, holiday card and tax receipt. See flyer for details.

Winter Break Adventure Camps at four nature centres Dec. 27 to Jan. 5.

Registration is open for Winter Break Adventure Camps at Shade's Mills, Guelph Lake, Apps' Mill and Laurel Creek nature centres. There are a variety of registration options that include single days Dec. 27, 28 and 29, and four days together Jan. 2 to 5. Daily outdoor activities allow kids to explore

the fields and forests around the nature centres. For details and to register online visit www.grandriver.eventbrite.ca.

Order trees from the GRCA any time before March 1

Landowners can order trees to be planted on their own properties of 2.5 acres or more (exclusive of buildings) from the GRCA until March 1. Orders must be for 200 seedlings or 20 saplings or more. For more information or to arrange a visit to your property, check www.grandriver.ca/trees, email trees@grandriver.ca or call 519-621-2761 and ask for a Forestry Specialist.

Note: All GRCA events and updates are posted online and available at www.calendar.grandriver.ca

Share the resources – Share the responsibility

Follow the GRCA:



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givegrand 

What do you give someone who has everything? A tree, of course! Or how about a metre of nature trail?

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\$30

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Place orders by December 18, 2017. Charitable receipts will be issued for donations.

The Grand River Conservation Foundation

supports priority programs of the Grand River Conservation Authority. These programs enrich the natural values of the Grand River watershed and encourage people to enjoy, and learn from, the outdoors.



www.GRCF.ca