

Soil Health Working Group Terms of Reference

1. Introduction

Niagara's soil health is of critical importance to the region's agricultural sector. Protecting and enhancing soil health not only supports a productive agricultural system, but also contributes to environmental sustainability and resilience against the challenges of climate change.

Agricultural lands are under increasing stress and face many factors that threaten soil health including pollution from road salt and other contaminants, encroaching development, and increased demands on soils to grow food for an increasing population. These pressures can lead to the decreased function and health of the soil.

Niagara Region's Agricultural Policy and Action Committee (APAC) has identified the need for a dedicated Soil Health Working Group. This group will explore these challenges in greater depth and recommend strategies and actions to protect and enhance soil health across the region.

2. Purpose of the Terms of Reference

The purpose of this document is to outline the process for the establishment and operation of the Working Group. Upon its approval, this document will serve to guide the Working Group for the entire duration of the group's lifespan. Amendments may be made to this Terms of Reference (TOR) as required throughout the completion of the goals of the Working Group.

If it becomes necessary to amend this TOR, such changes will be communicated to the members of the Working Group in advance to ensure that they understand the changes and will continue to commit their membership under the changes.

3. Mandate of the Working Group

The Working Group's mandate is to identify and assess the key issues and challenges facing the health of the region's agricultural soils. The group will explore approaches and opportunities for protecting and enhancing soil health. Members are expected to actively participate, provide input, and to bring forward the perspectives of the organizations they represent. The Working Group will provide a report to APAC summarizing key findings and recommendations for next steps.

4. Membership

Membership of the Working Group will include:

- 2 Members from APAC
- Community subject matter experts (1 – 2 persons)
- One (1) Regional staff member
- Up to one (1) representative from each Local Area Municipality (12 total)

Participation in the Working Group is an entirely voluntary, non-compensated position.

5. Term

The Working Group is established to achieve the specific goals as set out by this TOR. Members will maintain their terms on the Working Group for one (1) year, or until the completion of the specified goals, whichever is earlier.

It is preferred that the representative from each organization participate for the full term without the use of alternates or delegates, to ensure the effectiveness and continuity of the group. The need for the replacement of any Working Group member will be considered on an individual basis.

6. Roles and Responsibilities

The role of the Working Group is to develop and evaluate options related to issues of soil health in Niagara, and to make recommendations for APAC's consideration. Working Group members should expect to be assigned tasks necessary towards the successful completion of the mandate of the group.

The following outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Working Group members and Working Group Chair.

6.1 Working Group Members

Members of the Working Group will provide valuable leadership, input, and technical advice. Members are expected to:

- Participate in a professional, courteous, and respectful manner that allows for the exchange of various viewpoints and perspectives.
- Behave in a manner which facilitates a collaborative environment of open and equitable discussion and communication.
- Participate constructively and in accordance with the terms of reference.

- Bring the perspective of the organization they represent to the discussion.
- Liaise with the organization they represent and disseminate information where appropriate.
- Commit to the full term of the Working Group.
- Review information provided in advance of Working Group meetings or other deadlines provided by e-mail.
- Attend the majority of Working Group meetings and be prepared to actively participate.
- Note distinction between organizational and personal opinions (if applicable).
- Respect any issues of confidentiality arising in meetings or other proceedings of the Working Group.

6.2 Working Group Chair

A Chair and Vice Chair will be elected from the Working Group members at the first meeting. As per the APAC TOR, the Working Group should be chaired by a voting member of APAC, where possible. The Chair is expected to:

- Be responsible for convening and leading the group. Schedule meetings as required.
- Provide secretariat function: prepare and distribute agendas prior to meetings, manage communications between the Working Group, record all inputs, advise, and suggestions, prepare meeting notes including action items and report back to APAC.
- Facilitate Working Group meetings: keep meetings on-time and on-track, ensure openness and equity, and encourage balanced participation between all members.
- Ensure the appropriate reporting of information to APAC.

7. Meetings and Attendance

7.1 Meetings and Attendance

The effectiveness of the Working Group is based on the diversity of advice, input, and suggestions received from its members. Meetings are intended to be informal and structured to encourage maximum flexibility and open discussion. Members of the Working Group should strive to attend all meetings and other activities.

Members must advise the Working Group Chair if they anticipate attendance to be an issue. Working Group members who are unable to attend a meeting are requested to provide their written input to the Chair prior to the meeting.

7.2 Meeting Schedule

It is anticipated that the Working Group will meet bi-monthly over the course of the year. Meetings will be held virtually.

7.3 Agendas, Notes and Materials

The Chair and Vice Chair will prepare a draft agenda for each meeting that will be circulated in advance along with any information material for discussion at the meeting. Notes of the meeting will be circulated to Working Group members for review prior to finalization. Approved notes will be provided to update APAC.

8. Decision Making

The Working Group is not expected to share a single viewpoint in regards to each individual aspect of the issues being considered. However, the Working Group will be encouraged to appropriately discuss and debate ideas towards a consensus decision as there may be times that the Working Group will be asked to come to a conclusion or consensus on a particular matter. For Working Group members that may be doubt as to their position or view, they will be asked to refer to the following scale for direction.

1. I can say an unqualified “yes” to the decision. I am satisfied the decision is an expression of the wisdom of the group.
2. I find the decision perfectly acceptable.
3. I can live with the decision although I am not especially enthusiastic about it.
4. I do not fully agree with the decision and need to register my view about it. However, I do not choose to block the decision. I am willing to support the decision because I trust the wisdom of the group.
5. I do not agree with the decision and feel the need to stand in the way of this decision being accepted.
6. I feel that we have no clear sense of unity in the group. We need to do more work before consensus can be reached.

If, after a period of time, no consensus can be reached, differences will be noted and it is expected that the Chair will mediate a decision for the Working Group, as required.

9. Communication and Confidentiality

Most communication with Working Group members will take place via email.

All material disseminated and discussed as part of the Working Group is assumed to be confidential and should not be shared beyond member's internal working teams without the express written consent of the Working Group Chair. Members shall not express an opinion on behalf of the Working Group or discuss with the media any information discussed during the Working Group meetings in order to maintain confidentiality and integrity of the process. Working Group members shall declare any potential conflicts of interest associated with meeting discussions. Breach of confidentiality will result in immediate removal from the Working Group.