

Toronto

Ottawa won't order federal review of controversial wastewater treatment plant in Erin, Ont.

Opponents say the proposed plant would threaten the West Credit River

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Community members opposed to a planned wastewater treatment plant in the Town of Erin have put up

hundreds of signs in an effort to draw attention to their concerns. (John Badcock/CBC News)

[comments](#)



The federal government says it will not push pause on plans for a controversial wastewater treatment plant in Erin, Ont., that some conservation groups and residents say threatens a pristine coldwater river.

[In a decision released Wednesday](#), Minister of Environment and Climate Change Jonathan Wilkinson said that adverse effects from the facility "will be limited through project design" and that the plant will need to adhere to a host of environmental laws.

The proposed plant could eventually dump up to 7.2 million litres of treated effluent every day into the West Credit River, a small coldwater stream home to one of the few remaining wild Brook trout populations in this part of the province.

A coalition of five conservation organizations and concerned residents had [formally requested that Wilkinson step in and designate the project](#) for a federal environmental impact assessment, as [he recently did with the proposed Highway 413](#).

- [**Key decision coming soon in fight over 'crown jewel' of southern Ontario trout streams**](#)

That would have likely delayed construction on the initial phases of the facility — set to begin later this year — and potentially lead to design changes or even a cancellation of the project.

The plant would accommodate construction of new subdivisions in the growing but still largely rural Town of Erin, about 80 kilometres northwest of Toronto. Already in the late design stages, plans for the facility were approved by the Ontario Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks in

August 2019.



The West Credit River is a tributary of the larger Credit River. With its headwaters within the boundaries of Erin, the coldwater stream flows eastward through the hamlet of Belfountain before it meets with the main branch of the Credit River. (Steve Noakes/West Credit River Watch)

Opponents of the project, loosely affiliated through an organization called the Coalition for the West Credit River, [told CBC News earlier this month](#) that they feel the municipal environmental assessment fell short in several key aspects.

Among them, the group said, was a failure to account for the future impacts of climate change on the natural river system and the temperature of the effluent that would be piped into the West Credit.

The coalition and many frustrated local residents in the area — especially

those who live downstream of Erin — also said the community consultation process was flawed. An online petition in support of a federal review garnered more than 22,000 signatures, while some 670 people wrote letters to Wilkinson asking for a pause on the project.

Conservative MP Kyle Seebach, who represents the riding of Dufferin–Caledon where the West Credit River is located, also presented a petition in the House of Commons in support of federal action.

In a statement, the Coalition for the West Credit River said it was disappointed in Wilkinson's decision but that it is "not deterred" by the setback.

"We will continue on with our work to protect this highly valued coldwater Brook Trout population in the West Credit River," said Judy Mabee, chair of the organization.

"We are more than willing to work with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and other federal and provincial regulators, including the Town of Erin and its consultants, to advocate for a wastewater plant that sets a new best in class industry standard for the protection of sensitive coldwater receiving streams."

The Town of Erin meanwhile finds itself in a difficult position. It expects to [see substantial growth in coming decades](#), with the population of two main centres within the town to climb from roughly 4,500 now to as many as 10,000 by 2040.

And the municipality currently relies on aging septic tanks, which themselves pose environmental risks.

In a news release, town council said it welcomes the federal government decision.

"This is a key infrastructure project for the sustainable growth of our community," the release said.

"The protection of our environment will remain at the forefront of our discussions as this project moves forward and our advocacy with the higher levels of government is focused at making this project a viable and sustainable solution for Erin and our residents who call it home."

But opponents argue the effluent from the wastewater treatment plant would ultimately threaten the healthy, wild Brook trout that call the West Credit home.



A juvenile West Credit River Brook trout. The West Credit draws anglers, especially fly fishers, from around Ontario due to its healthy population of naturally-reproducing 'brookies.' (Lucas Powers/CBC)

Historically, Brook trout would have filled the many spring-fed streams that once wound through the Niagara Escarpment and its watersheds. Some still flow today, though few if any support a population of wild trout as prolific and healthy as the West Credit.

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Brook trout are sensitive fish. They need cool, clean water and lots of oxygen to thrive. Water temperatures above 19 C stress them out, while temperatures in the 23 to 24 C range can be fatal.

Urban, industrial and agricultural development have contributed to a drastic decline in the number of Ontario rivers and streams that can sustain wild Brook trout, or "brookies," as many anglers affectionately call them.