

P O L I C Y B R I E F

The Economic Case for Protecting the Frontenac Arch Biosphere

Tourism, Conservation, and the ALTO High-Speed Rail Southern Corridor

Prepared for Ministers with portfolios in Environment, Tourism, and Climate Change

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Executive Summary

Canada's protected natural areas generate \$10.9 billion in GDP annually, supporting 150,000 jobs and returning \$1.4 billion in tax revenue [1]. The Frontenac Arch UNESCO Biosphere Reserve is one of those assets. The southern corridor under consideration for Alto's high-speed rail line would cut directly through it.

New research from the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, peer-reviewed by the C.D. Howe Institute and Simon Fraser University, confirms that **every \$1 invested in protected areas generates \$3.62 in visitor spending** [1]. Protected areas play an outsized role in rural economies, contributing up to 1.6% of rural GDP nationally. The Frontenac Arch is precisely such an area — a landscape whose tourism economy is built on ecological integrity, UNESCO recognition, and the character of a slow, low-impact, nature-based destination.

Opposition is building rapidly. As of late February 2026, five municipal councils along the proposed corridor — South Frontenac, Rideau Lakes, Stone Mills, Tyendinaga, and Belleville — have voted to formally oppose the southern corridor. Both MPs whose ridings fall within the corridor — Scott Reid (Lanark–Frontenac) and Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington—Tyendinaga) — have publicly opposed the project [2–9].

This brief presents the case that the corridor decision is not only an environmental question but an economic one — and that Ministers with portfolios in environment, tourism, and climate change have a direct interest in ensuring the full economic value of the region's protected areas is accounted for before a route is selected.

Key Figures

National GDP from protected areas (2023–24)	\$10.9 billion [1]
Return on investment in protected areas	\$3.62 per \$1 invested [1]
Jobs supported by protected areas nationally	150,000 [1]
Tax revenue returned to governments	\$1.4 billion [1]
Canadian tourism revenue (2024)	\$104.4 billion [8]
Carbon stored in Canada's protected areas	51,400 Gt CO ₂ e — worth \$51.1 trillion [1]
UNESCO designations in the corridor	2 (Rideau Canal WHS + Frontenac Arch Biosphere)
Municipal councils opposing southern corridor	5, plus 1 MP [2–7]

The Landscape at Stake

The Frontenac Arch is an ancient granite bridge connecting the Canadian Shield to the Adirondack Mountains — the **only continuous north-south forest corridor in eastern North America**. Five forest ecosystems converge here. It holds the highest diversity of reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates of any national park region in Canada, and is a nationally designated Important Area for Reptiles and Amphibians (IMPARA) [9].

The region contains **three formally designated Key Biodiversity Areas** (Thousand Islands, Charleston Lake, Frontenac Forests), with the Napanee Limestone Plain proposed as a fourth [10]. The Rideau Canal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, winds through its eastern extent. These designations underpin the region's ecological function as a continental wildlife corridor and its competitive advantage as a destination for ecotourism, cycling, paddling, and agri-tourism.

The Frontenac Arch Biosphere Network has confirmed that it **was not consulted by Alto during initial corridor planning** [11]. This is a significant gap, given UNESCO's expectation that biosphere reserves serve as sites for sustainable development and that infrastructure decisions within them involve stakeholder engagement.

The Economic Argument

Protected areas are economic infrastructure. The CPAWS white paper demonstrates that conservation generates measurable, sustained economic returns — not just environmental benefits. For rural regions like those in the Frontenac Arch, where the tourism economy depends on landscape integrity rather than urban attractions, these returns are disproportionately important [1].

The tourism economy at risk

The communities within the Frontenac Arch Biosphere — including South Frontenac, Rideau Lakes, Stone Mills, and the broader Leeds & Grenville and Frontenac County areas — support a nature-based tourism economy anchored by the Cataract Trail (a 104 km segment of the Trans-Canada Trail), Charleston Lake Provincial Park, Frontenac Provincial Park, the Rideau Canal heritage corridor, rural agri-tourism, and a growing cycling and paddling sector.

Visitors come to these communities for what they **are** — quiet, ecologically intact, dark-sky landscapes. That character is the economic product. It cannot coexist with a permanently fenced, 300 km/h rail corridor that bisects the landscape, fragments habitat, closes trails, and imposes a decade of construction disruption.

The CPAWS finding that protected areas contribute up to **1.6% of rural GDP nationally** is directly relevant here. These are not urban centres that can absorb disruption. They are rural communities where tourism is woven into the agricultural and conservation economy, and where damage to the landscape is damage to livelihoods [1].

The tunnel effect: tracks without stations

International research on HSR and tourism consistently identifies a critical distinction: **stations create tourism; tracks do not**. The southern corridor passes through these communities without a planned station.

- Research on Spanish HSR found that cities with stations saw measurable tourism increases, while cities the train passed through without stopping saw **negligible or negative effects** as competing destinations became easier to reach [12].
- China's experience shows that HSR promotes tourism in node cities but that non-station communities may **lose market share** as travellers are drawn more quickly to destination hubs [12].
- For communities in the Frontenac Arch, the effect would be to make Ottawa, Peterborough, and Toronto more accessible to each other — potentially **drawing visitors away from rural southeastern Ontario** — while imposing all construction and operational burdens on the communities the line passes through.

VIA Rail displacement

MP Scott Reid has confirmed in writing that either HSR corridor option is likely to lead to **lower VIA Rail ridership and service cuts through southeastern Ontario** [13]. VIA currently provides the region's primary passenger rail link for visitors arriving without a car. For destinations whose tourism brand is built on environmental responsibility, losing this low-carbon access mode compounds the damage.

Construction and Operational Impacts

The construction of a 300 km/h rail corridor is not a temporary inconvenience — it is a **major civil infrastructure event lasting a decade or more**. For tourism-dependent rural communities, the effects are existential.

- **Trail loss:** The Cataraqui Trail runs directly through the proposed corridor alignment. Alto has acknowledged its intent to utilise existing corridor infrastructure to reduce land acquisition costs. Trail closures or permanent loss would eliminate itinerary-based cycling tourism and the network of B&Bs, outfitters, and cafes that depend on trail traffic [11].
- **Road disruption:** Dozens of grade separations would require extended closures on secondary roads that are often the only access to farms, cottages, B&Bs, heritage inns, and agri-tourism operations.
- **Noise and landscape disruption:** Heavy equipment, blasting, night lighting, and truck traffic are fundamentally incompatible with a region whose tourism product is quiet, dark skies, and natural vistas.
- **Permanent fencing:** A high-speed rail line requires continuous fencing across its entire length — an impermeable barrier through the landscape that fragments habitat, isolates populations of endangered species (Blanding's Turtles, Gray Ratsnakes, Cerulean Warblers), and eliminates the wildlife encounters that drive ecotourism.
- **UNESCO risk:** Loss of ecological integrity provides grounds for review or downgrade of the Frontenac Arch Biosphere designation — a reputational consequence that would affect the entire region's international tourism positioning.

Growing Municipal and Political Opposition

As of late February 2026, every township council along the proposed southern corridor that has voted on the issue has voted against it. This is an unprecedented level of unified regional opposition to a federal infrastructure project at the consultation stage.

- **South Frontenac Township** — unanimous opposition, February 2026, citing potential for “generational devastation” [2].
- **Rideau Lakes Township** — unanimous opposition, February 9, 2026 [3].
- **Stone Mills Township** — unanimous opposition, February 9, 2026, calling on Alto to “remove rural municipal lands from consideration where communities will experience disruption without service benefit” [4].
- **Tyendinaga Township** — officially opposed the southern route, February 19, 2026 [5].
- **Belleville City Council** — approved motion opposing the southern corridor, February 24, 2026. Councillor Kathryn Brown noted the route could impact 2,500–2,700 homeowners and up to eight Quinte Conservation land holdings [6].
- **MP Shelby Kramp-Neuman** (Hastings—Lennox and Addington—Tyendinaga) — released a statement on February 25, 2026 opposing both routes, citing “overwhelming concern” from constituents about “economic viability, proposed environmental and cultural impacts, federal expropriation of land, logistics over the lack of level crossings, and potential negative effects on emergency services” [7].

Climate and Conservation Value

Canada’s protected areas store immense amounts of carbon — the equivalent of emissions from 57.8 billion cars annually. The CPAWS research estimates this carbon storage is worth **\$51.1 trillion in avoided global economic damages** [1]. The Frontenac Arch, as an intact forest corridor, contributes to this carbon storage function.

A permanently fenced HSR corridor through the Arch would sever the north-south ecological connectivity that allows species to move in response to climate change. The Nature Conservancy of Canada describes the Arch as “**a narrow pinch point**” in the entire continental wildlife corridor [14]. Once severed, this connectivity cannot be restored.

Ontario’s Bill 5 weakened provincial species-at-risk protections in 2025, increasing the weight carried by federal SARA obligations [15]. At the same time, the Build Canada Act (Bill C-5) grants Alto enhanced expropriation powers and potential environmental exemptions [16]. **The combination of weakened provincial protections and enhanced federal project powers creates a governance gap** that Ministers with environment and climate portfolios have a direct responsibility to address.

Regulatory Context

- **SARA Section 79** requires Alto to notify the competent minister and assess impacts to listed species before any project proceeds [15].
- **CEPA** declared road salts toxic in 2001; de-icing chemicals applied to HSR infrastructure in the corridor engage these obligations [17].

- **Fisheries Act Section 36(3)** prohibits deposit of deleterious substances in fish-bearing waters — relevant to both de-icing runoff and construction sediment [17].
- **UNESCO Biosphere** designation implies a commitment to sustainable development; infrastructure decisions that degrade ecological integrity risk reputational consequences internationally [9].
- **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework** — Canada committed to protecting 30% of lands and waters by 2030. Degrading a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve while pursuing this commitment creates a credibility gap [1].

What We Ask of Ministers

The corridor decision is expected in 2026. The following actions would ensure that the economic and ecological value of the Frontenac Arch is accounted for before an irreversible commitment is made:

- **1. Commission a Tourism Economic Impact Assessment** before corridor selection. Alto's socioeconomic assessments have focused on productivity gains for corridor cities. A dedicated study is needed to quantify what construction and permanent operations would cost the rural tourism economy of the Frontenac Arch [11].
- **2. Require that the Environmental Assessment include a protected-area economic valuation** using the CPAWS methodology (\$3.62 return per \$1 invested) to establish the full opportunity cost of degrading the Frontenac Arch Biosphere [1].
- **3. Ensure SARA Section 79 notification has occurred** — the obligation is triggered by current knowledge, not by the formal start of the environmental assessment [15].
- **4. Direct Parks Canada and Environment and Climate Change Canada** to engage formally with Alto on the implications for the Rideau Canal UNESCO World Heritage Site and the Frontenac Arch Biosphere Reserve.
- **5. Require binding mitigation commitments** as pre-conditions of any corridor selection, including: continuity of the Trans-Canada Trail; wildlife crossing infrastructure through the Frontenac Arch; karst hydrogeological investigation of the Napanee limestone plain; and construction-phase access guarantees for tourism businesses [17].
- **6. Advocate for preservation of VIA Rail services** through southeastern Ontario, recognizing these as essential tourism and community infrastructure [13].
- **7. Engage Indigenous partners**, including the Mohawk Council of Tyendinaga, in the design and oversight of any corridor decision affecting lands within the Frontenac Arch and Napanee Plain [17].
- **8. Acknowledge the regional opposition.** Five municipal councils and two sitting MPs have formally opposed the corridor. The consultation process should demonstrate that these positions have been heard and substantively addressed [2–7].

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