



Possibility grows here.

Greenbelt Foundation

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Greenbelt Foundation Backgrounder

54 Million Trees Needed in the Region

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Overview

The Greenbelt is the centre piece of Southern Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), one of the most biologically diverse areas in the country. The GGH is also Canada's most densely populated and rapidly urbanizing region. Population growth is expected to reach 15 million by 2051. A Nature Conservancy of Canada report shows two "crisis ecoregions" in the GGH, a designation that refers to an area of high ecological value at high-risk of being degraded or lost.

Forest cover in the GGH currently stands below Environment and Climate Change Canada's 30 per cent target for healthy forests. Planting 54 million trees will help reach this target and set the stage for achieving future targets of 40-50 per cent forest cover and self-sustaining natural systems and species. (These targets are cited from Environment Canada's 2013 report *How Much Habitat is Enough?*)

Background

Despite the many known benefits of forests, we continue to lose them from the landscape. More than 5,000 hectares of woodland in the GGH have been lost since 2000 according to the [Near-Urban Nature Network: A Solution for Climate Change and Biodiversity Loss](#) report. However, an investment in 54 million trees in the GGH will be protected from future deforestation, as plantings would be directed to already-protected Greenbelt lands and a network of ecological cores and corridors either already protected or recommended for protection in the Near-Urban Nature Network report.

Near-urban nature that surrounds and intersects our cities includes forests, river valleys, farmlands, and other ecological features. In the GGH, more than 850,000 hectares (27 per cent) of near-urban natural areas are estimated to be available and appropriate for tree planting. These lands include: the Greenbelt; an extensive network of municipal forests, private woodlots, and conservation lands; community greenspaces including Cootes to Escarpment EcoSystem Park, Brock Lands, and trails systems with the Niagara Escarpment and Oak Ridges Moraine; buffer zones around river valleys; marginal farmlands; the Bruce Peninsula; and shoreline areas along Lake Ontario, Simcoe, and Scugog.



Rationale Behind 54 Million:

Guidance from Environment Canada for the Great Lakes Areas of Concern suggests that watersheds should have at least 30 per cent of forest cover. To reach 30 per cent cover in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, approximately 54,000 hectares (2 per cent of the land) would need to be reforested. At a low planting density of 1000 trees/hectare, this represents 54 million trees.

Reforestation on the scale of 54 million is far larger than any recent initiatives. Forests Ontario, the largest tree planter in southern Ontario, plants about 3 million trees annually (Green Analytics and Forests Ontario, 2019.) However, in the 1930s, a time of similar economic turmoil, the provincial government was growing and providing 7 million seedlings to farmers and other land stewards in southern Ontario.

Health Benefits and Economic Impacts:

Municipalities and conservation authorities in Peel are planting trees in urban areas to reduce exposure to extreme heat and associated negative health impacts. Adding about 54,000 trees in one neighbourhood in Brampton would return a net benefit of \$3 million a year associated with health benefits, including reduced air pollution and exposure to heat, increased physical activity, and improved mental well-being.

Near-urban natural areas contribute an estimated 8,700 jobs and \$509 million in direct GDP impact in southern Ontario. This value does not account for the economic value of ecosystem services in the region. Many economic sectors rely on the functions and benefits of a thriving natural system, including eco-tourism, agriculture, forestry, and native plant industry.

About the Southern Ontario Nature Coalition (SONC)

SONC is a partnership of experienced provincial, regional, Indigenous, agricultural, community-based organizations, as well as land-based policy experts, and is committed to engaging Indigenous communities in accordance with community protocols and the development of ethical space for all to contribute meaningfully.

SONC includes: [Greenbelt Foundation](#), [Ontario Nature](#), [Cambium Indigenous Professional Services](#), [Wildlands League](#), [Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System](#), [Carolinian Canada](#), [Ontario Land Trust Alliance](#), [Ontario Farmland Trust](#)

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