



Farmland at risk: Why land-use planning needs improvements for a healthy agricultural future in the Greater Golden Horseshoe

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environmental
defence

Executive Summary

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The Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) is Canada's most populated and fastest-growing region. The region's population was 8.7 million in 2011, and the most ambitious projections say it will hit almost 13.5 million by 2041. Meanwhile, the number of jobs in the GGH is forecast to rise from 4.5 million to 6.3 million. Rapid growth will exacerbate existing challenges such as traffic congestion, pressure on infrastructure, loss of agricultural land and natural spaces, water quality challenges, and a changing climate. However, if carefully planned and smartly managed, growth can present an opportunity to build a more prosperous, healthy, and sustainable Ontario, with vibrant urban and rural communities that offer more (and better) options to live, work, and play.

Farmland makes up about half of the land area of the GGH and represents one of the most important economic sectors of the region, contributing \$11 billion and 38,000 jobs to Ontario's economy. This economic activity generates \$1.7 billion in tax revenue for the three levels of government, about 38 per cent of all taxes received from agriculture in Ontario. Approximately one third of the province's agri-food industry is based in the GGH and 42 per cent of Ontario's best quality (Class 1) farmland is located in the region. A strong and stable agricultural industry is essential to Ontario's long-term economic health.

Consumer trends are creating a significant demand for local food in the GGH. The unique combination of soils, climate, infrastructure, and access to a major market at their doorstep makes production for local markets in the GGH a natural fit. It is estimated that over 50 per cent of the province's \$20 billion in imported food products could be produced in Ontario. Farms in the GGH have the capacity to respond to the growing interest in local food. Over 200 different foods are grown commercially in the region, including fruits and vegetables, grains, meat and dairy products, and non-food items, such as flowers. The Greenbelt has

two of the Province's four "specialty crop areas," the Niagara Tender Fruit and Holland Marsh, which have many fruit and vegetable operations that support local food supply chains.

The key to a robust agricultural industry is the same everywhere: the protection of the land base on which to farm and carry out farm-related activities. But farmland not only serves as the essential ingredient of the GGH's bustling food industry, it provides a number of other precious ecosystem services that benefit all GGH residents, including storm-water storage and runoff control, protection against erosion on waterways, water filtration, carbon sequestration in soils and plants, pollination, and habitat for many animal and plant species. Beyond these essential ecological and economic functions, farmland in the GGH also provides aesthetic and cultural benefits, including opportunities for city-dwellers to reconnect with farmers and food production. It is estimated that the 3.8 million acres of farmland in the GGH supplies about \$1.6 billion in ecological services per year.

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These are some of the many reasons why the Ontario government has taken important steps to preserve farmland and environmentally significant areas in the GGH. The Greenbelt Plan (2005) declared agriculture to be the predominant land use in the area covered by the plan and provided permanent protection to the agricultural land base. The plan has helped preserve agricultural land and operations

within its boundaries over the last 10 years.

Outside of the Greenbelt, the prospects for preserving farmland are less certain. The conversion of this farmland to urban uses is governed by the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Growth Plan), a weaker planning framework. The Growth Plan aims to shape growth in a less environmentally destructive way, but still leaves farmland vulnerable to urbanization. In other words, Ontarians can be reasonably assured of the permanence of agricultural land within the Greenbelt (assuming it is not weakened or farmland removed from it), but agricultural land in the GGH outside the Greenbelt can still be paved over for greenfield development, which could lead to more more sprawl subdivisions.

The copious attention given to the Greenbelt has given rise to the perception that protecting the Greenbelt lands is sufficient on its own to ensure that agriculture will thrive within the larger region.

It is important to keep in mind that about 75 per cent of the best farmland of the Toronto Metropolitan Region (a region slightly smaller than the GGH), and about 70 per cent of the region's greenlands lie outside the Greenbelt boundaries. These less protected lands are the ones at risk of being paved over to accommodate an additional 2.5 million people by 2031. How growth is accommodated in these areas will determine the future of agricultural lands and the agricultural economy in the GGH. This in turn will have an enormous impact on the ecological and economic well-being of the region and the province as a whole.

At present, there are several challenges facing agriculture in the GGH linked directly or

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indirectly to land-use planning. The GGH planning framework is undoubtedly a major step forward in the direction of managing growth and preserving farmland in the region. Despite the lofty objectives of the Growth Plan, there are signs that implementation of the framework is not going as effectively as desired. The growth management goals of the Growth Plan were weakened somewhat as the Plan was rolled out, allowing expensive low density growth to continue in many locations. The Province has allowed these changes in response to the demands of municipalities hungry for tax assessment and development charge revenues, even though these revenues are not adequate to cover more expensive servicing costs associated with greenfield or low density development. Speculators and developers also lobbying for expansions to settlement boundaries so as to incorporate their lands, creating an unhealthy cycle of municipalities requiring new sprawl developments to pay for the debts of existing ones. This has given rise to one of the most daunting challenges facing the GGH, namely leap-frog sprawl development over the Greenbelt into less-protected agricultural areas in the outer ring.

As urban development encroaches on agricultural land, people with no attachment to farming come into close contact with farm operations. This is the case when the urban envelope expands onto farmland without adequate buffers or when non-agricultural uses are permitted in rural areas, either because they were approved under the rules that predated the new planning framework or because the new framework permits, under certain limited circumstances, such development. These ongoing trends in the GGH are giving rise to conflict between the farmers and new arrivals in the countryside, with persistent challenges to normal farm practices that undermine the long-term viability of farming in affected areas.

While the GGH planning framework strains to control sprawl in the region, other policy tools are

showing themselves to be inadequate. Compared to other policy areas, such as natural heritage, the tools needed to protect agricultural land are far less developed. There is little understanding of the agricultural system among provincial agencies and municipal planners. Decisions are made routinely that inadvertently affect agricultural interests and there is little pressure at any level to assess the impact of planning, road design, and environmental regulations on farmers and their ability to persevere as stewards of their lands. Major new infrastructure projects—including new and extended highways, sewer pipes, industrial energy projects, and high-voltage hydro lines—are approved using an environmental assessment process that is insensitive to the agricultural system. These projects expropriate whole parcels of farmland, often split remaining farm parcels and serve as physical barriers between farmed lands. Despite its huge economic importance to the region and the province as a whole, policy- and decision-makers are often deaf to the needs and requests of farmers.

What is needed is a fresh perspective on farmland in the GGH, one that sees agriculture as a permanent feature of the regional landscape and farming as an essential component of our economy and cultural heritage.

The accumulated effects of these stresses have not only reduced the total area of land being farmed in the GGH but have also threatened it with something even more insidious—fragmentation. As urban land uses encroach upon and intrude into the countryside, essential linkages are lost as feeder businesses “see the writing on the wall” and move out of the area. Fragmentation weakens the synergy involved in having a concentration of viable farms and support services in a given area. Farmers have to travel further to get to essential services, such as abattoirs or to obtain farm technical services. The effort involved becomes too great and more farmers leave the area or retire early. As synergy is

lost, farming in the area tips into decline—buildings begin to decay, irrigation and drainage systems stop working, and farming may even be abandoned on some parcels. Within the GGH, signs of decline are visible in formerly vibrant agricultural areas in the white belt, and around other growing centres in the outer ring.

Ontario’s land-use planning system is geared towards the accommodation of urban (residential) development and other urban-related land uses within the framework of “good planning principles”. Within this framework, farmland is typically viewed as a background landscape upon which development is to be painted, or in other words, as tarmac-in-waiting. This perspective undermines confidence in the long-term feasibility of farming, and erodes farm-owners’ willingness to make the personal and financial commitments necessary to the continuation of this way of life. The resulting uncertainty in the farming community helps fuel the forces of urban development, the primary threat to farmland in the GGH.

A fresh perspective is needed on farmland in the GGH, one that sees agriculture as a permanent feature of the regional landscape and farming as an essential component of our economy and cultural heritage. This perspective is entirely compatible with smart growth planning principles that aim to contain and direct urban growth to settlement areas already or easily served by the necessary infrastructure. It is also consistent with principles of ecological planning that are increasingly coming to the forefront, as society realizes that we need to see ecological (including agricultural) systems holistically and protect and conserve them accordingly. The need for a new perspective is also being driven home by global climate change. Leadership is needed to accommodate population growth without contributing to this all-embracing problem or compromising our ability to adapt to the climate changes clearly upon us or those coming in the near future.

Recommendations

Positive Planning

1 The Province should adopt a “positive planning” approach to land-use planning in the Greater Golden Horseshoe that better integrates agricultural concerns into land-use decision-making, permanently protects areas of high agricultural potential, and supports agriculture as the preeminent land use.

Agricultural System

2 The Province should identify and map an agricultural system for the Greater Golden Horseshoe. As a prelude, the Growth Plan should be revised to describe an agricultural system in greater detail and assign clear responsibility for leading the effort to define and map the system across the region.

Better understanding of agricultural issues

4 The Province, municipalities and agricultural stakeholders should enhance agricultural understanding among officials by working through professional associations to offer continuing education on rural issues.

5 The Province should encourage and provide support to municipalities to appoint agricultural liaison officers, i.e. a senior official who would advise council on agricultural matters, help promote agricultural economic development, provide awareness training for municipal officials, help farmers and food industry entrepreneurs navigate approval processes, and provide feedback to regulatory authorities on ways to improve review and approval procedures.

6 The Province should revise the Growth Plan to require Agricultural Advisory Committees (AACs) in each region and provide more direction on their mandate and functioning on decisions related to agriculture and growth management. The Plan should be revised to require AACs throughout the region and provide more direction on their mandate and functioning.

Agricultural Impact Assessments

7 The Province should revise the Growth Plan to require that municipalities conduct Agricultural Impact Assessments under relevant circumstances, such as major planning strategies affecting agricultural areas and for all non-agricultural development proposals on or near agricultural land.

Conflict Prevention

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The Province should develop new separation distance formulae for non-livestock agricultural uses that also need to be protected from neighbouring uses. The revised guidelines should direct municipalities to establish the minimum distance setbacks early in the land-use planning process, i.e. at the time of an Official Plan amendment for new or expanding settlement areas.

9

The 2014 Provincial Policy Statement allows limited non-residential, non-agricultural uses in prime agricultural areas under certain conditions. The Province should revise the Growth Plan to adopt language that further restricts or prohibits these uses in prime agricultural areas.

10

The Province should monitor municipal planning decisions that would relax restrictions on non-agricultural land uses in agricultural areas—such as re-designating agricultural land as rural land—and appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board if necessary.

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The Province should prepare a guide on landscape design and buffering between agricultural and non-agricultural land uses. The Province should also adopt language in the Growth Plan to require that non-agriculture uses in proximity to an agricultural zone be buffered using principals found in the guide.

Environmental Assessment

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The Province should adopt a policy-level directive requiring a comprehensive and integrated assessment of agricultural issues during environmental assessments and to prioritize minimizing impacts on the agricultural system. The Province should reinforce these goals in the four land-use plans that make up the planning framework in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Fiscal tools

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The Province should revise the *Development Charges Act* to ensure development charges discourage sprawl by including all costs related to growth in their purview and allowing infrastructure standards to rise rather than be based on a backward looking 10-year average service level cap. Furthermore, the Province should revise the Act to encourage municipalities to base charges on the location in which the development occurs. Finally, the revised Act should provide a statutory exemption to farm buildings/structures from all development charges as they typically do not require public infrastructure servicing.

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The Province should ensure the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) applies the same tax assessment rate for on-farm value-added operations as is applied to farms and farm outbuildings on agricultural lands.

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The Province should play a leading role in setting up an Environmental and Ecological Goods and Services system to recognize the non-agricultural benefits provided by agricultural lands in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Growth management

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The Province should revise the Growth Plan to include a moratorium on the growth of urban boundaries in the Greater Golden Horseshoe until at least 2031—even 2041.

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The Province should revise the Growth Plan to include a vision statement that lays out the government's commitment to limiting growth within the current urban boundaries and the need to permanently protect agricultural and countryside lands inside and outside the Greenbelt.

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The Province should establish permanent growth boundaries where mapping shows healthy agricultural systems are already in place or likely could be restored through permanent protection and other (e.g., economic development, infrastructure) policy supports.

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The Province should revise the Greenbelt and Growth Plans to acknowledge the preeminent role of agriculture in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

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Within the permanent countryside, land uses in prime agricultural areas unrelated to their principle vocation should not be permitted, except in cases where such uses can be shown to be in the greater public interest (infrastructure, aggregates, etc.) through an environmental assessment.

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The Province should increase intensification targets in the Growth Plan to 50 per cent, with 60 people and jobs per hectare on greenfield sites. The targets should continue to increase—based on market trends—during each future review of the Growth Plan.

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The Province should ensure that infrastructure funding to municipalities—in particular funding flowing from the federal gas tax—should be conditional on municipalities meeting their growth management targets.

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The Province should end exemptions for municipalities requesting to reduce their growth management targets.

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The Province should reconsider allowing upper-tier municipalities to allocate growth targets to lower-tier municipalities.

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The Province should reassess population and employment forecasts informing the Growth Plan, in light of more modest expectations for growth in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

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The Province should issue authoritative guidelines on the land budgeting methodology to be used for any future review of land supply needs in the region.



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The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (ofa.on.ca) is Canada's largest voluntary farm organization representing the interest of the province's farm families. As a farmer-led organization, the Federation understands farm issues and champions the interests of Ontario's farming community with governments and the public. The Federation is the voice of Ontario farmers for a sustainable farming and food sector.

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