

> FOOD SECURITY

Fighting GTA's sprawl with urban farms

Densifying Ontario's cities could boost quality of life

VAWN HIMMELSBACH
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Ran Goel is a farmer — an urban farmer, that is. As founder of Fresh City Farms, he left the law profession to do something he considered more meaningful. And in urban farming, he's found a way to "reconnect people with food in a way that is very positive," he said.

Beyond meeting the growing consumer demand for local food, urban density and peri-urban agriculture — versus uncontrolled urban sprawl that paves over the country's limited Class-1 farmland — may just bolster the overall quality of life in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), some experts say. Benefits range from producing a surprisingly wide variety of healthy and delicious foods to reducing environmental impacts.

Fresh City Farms' farm-to-table approach, for instance, reduces greenhouse gases by 75 per cent, Goel said. "It's very low waste — people have to order 24 hours ahead of time, so we know what we need to harvest, unlike a typical grocery store where there's 10, 20, 30 per cent waste." The farm delivers produce bags and meal kits directly to about 4,000 homes across the GTA.

Fresh City Farms leases private land, including two acres of federal land in Downsview Park, though tenure affects long-term planning. Its latest project is a 4,000-square-foot greenhouse, expected to be up and running this spring, on land owned by wireless solutions company Baka Communications. The two biggest obstacles to urban or peri-urban farming, Goel said, are the competing uses of land — farmers typically can't pay as much per square foot as developers — and attitudes on the part of city planning officials.

"The CEO of Baka is a very out-of-the-box thinker," Goel said.

Farmers in proximity to large, urban centres have a unique opportunity to reach more consumers demanding more local products. But peri-urban agriculture faces threats from urban sprawl, which is why major farm organizations across Ontario recently called on the provincial government to freeze urban boundaries.

The lost land

Ontario is losing farmland at a rapid rate. And when it's gone, it's gone, as are thousands of jobs — which ultimately affects consumers' access to local food and diminishes Canada's food security. Farmland at Risk, a report by Environmental Defence and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, found that 75 per cent of farmland in Toronto's Metropolitan



FRESH CITY FARMS

Member farmers harvest mizuna greens beds at Fresh City Farms two-acre organic farm at Downsview Park.

Region is unprotected and at risk of being paved over.

The silver bullet could be urban development that focuses on density, rather than sprawl. The provincial government has guidelines that municipalities are supposed to follow, "but many of them don't, and the province doesn't sanction them for not following those guidelines," said Rod MacRae, associate professor with the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University.

The Greenbelt Fund and Oak Ridge Moraine protect some of this land, but MacRae says it's a broader issue. "You can protect the farm, but what about the farmers?" It comes down to protecting the entire agricultural system.

"We don't value food — the average dollar you spend in a store, (only) 10 to 15 cents go back to the farm," he said.

Nor does Canada have a national food policy, which means "individual private actors are making their own decisions and most of these actors don't have a broader sense of... the food system," MacRae said. That's also leading to an increased dependence on imported food.

In 2012, imports (at \$19.8 billion) were almost twice as large as exports (at \$10.8 billion), according to the Greenbelt's Dollars & Sense report. If local production were expanded to replace even 10 per cent of the top 10 fruit and vegetable imports, the Ontario economy would gain close to a

quarter of a billion dollars in GDP and 3,400 full-time jobs — and help to improve the country's food security.

There's a common myth that Canada has vast tracts of available farmland. But, "most land in Canada is not good for farming and a chunk is suboptimal," MacRae said.

"We've put all these cities on the best farmland in the country... When we built the CN Tower, you could see 40 per cent of Class-1 land." Most of that is now covered in houses, businesses and strip malls.

"We should not undervalue the resources we have locally... we may not be able to rely on other regions of the world providing food."

MATT SETZKORN
ONTARIO FARMLAND TRUST

Linking food chain

An agricultural system is important because without it we won't be able to grow our own food, said Burkhard Mauberg, Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation CEO. "If you're a farmer growing crops or raising animals or making wine or beer, you need a system around you that supports your business. If you raise chickens, you need access to a veterinarian."

To have a successful agricultural system, those supply chains and sup-

port systems need to be in place. "What we've found as sprawl moves north of Toronto or west in Kitchener-Waterloo, farms move away because they're missing that support system," Mauberg said.

That's why farmers are speaking up. Last November, Ontario's major farm organizations, representing some 52,000 farms and 78,000 farmers, came together to call on the provincial government to freeze urban boundaries to protect farmland within the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) — an area that stretches from Niagara to Orillia to Peterborough.

The GGH is home to one of North America's largest agricultural and agri-food industry clusters, with farm production, food processing, food service, food distribution and retail that represents the fastest-growing employment sector in Ontario and generates \$12.3 billion in annual economic activity.

"The sentiment from the farming community is that policy is failing," said Matt Setzkorn, manager of land programs and policy with Ontario Farmland Trust.

There is already enough land allocated by municipalities to meet Ontario's expected population growth to 2031, according to a Neptis Foundation report.

"So why would the province leave the door open for municipalities to continue to add lands to their municipal areas in addition to what's al-

ready been designated?" Setzkorn said.

The freeze out

An urban boundary freeze would force the province and municipalities to shift toward increasing density of urban communities — which means more high-rises and fewer single-dwelling homes — and investing in public transit and transportation corridors, rather than building entirely new infrastructure.

While it's good for communities, it's also good for food security.

"Food security is something we need to be thinking about strategically as a province because of uncertainties around trade barriers," Setzkorn said.

"We're importing most of our fresh fruit and vegetables from the States, and a lot of that we can grow right here in Ontario."

Aside from a changing political climate south of the border, there's also climate change.

"We should not undervalue the resources we have locally, because we may not be able to rely on other regions of the world providing food," added Setzkorn, pointing to droughts in California.

"Since 1976, we've lost almost 20 per cent of our farmland, largely in southern Ontario. We are in the position to lose the ability to feed ourselves," Setzkorn said. "We need to do more — the current path is unsustainable."

> INNOVATION

Local farmers changing the game

Producers are creating new foods to help bolster the Canadian-made market

VAWN HIMMELSBACH
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Peri-urban agriculture reduces costs and carbon emissions, but it also provides more choice — and flavours — to a culturally diverse customer base. "I've had yet to eat a peach as juicy as one from Niagara," said Burkhard Mauberg, Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation CEO. Protecting this land will help Canada's overall food security, meeting demand for local products, but also allowing farmers to innovate and bring new products to market.

The Ontario Tender Fruit Growers, for example, is helping to bolster Niagara's tender fruit industry by

working with farmers to introduce new varieties and production techniques. In the 1980s, fire blight wiped out much of the province's pear supply, but new, hardier varieties are expected to drive a pear revival.

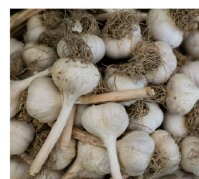
The Cold Snap pear was launched in Ontario in 2015 — a disease-resistant variety that stays crisp as it ripens. Thwaites Farms has also planted 10 acres of Asian pears, these high-density trees yield more per acre, improving the economic viability of operating an orchard. While a limited supply is currently available, once the newly planted trees mature the pears will be available throughout the province.

Against the Grain Farms is also taking a novel approach, cultivating a selection of heritage grains and new grains that thrive in Canadian soil, in the Canadian climate.

That includes hullless barley — a variety that has been adapted to grow in Canada — which has half the gluten found in wheat, as well as high levels of beta-glucan fibre, vitamins and minerals.

It's also growing purple corn, adapted to the Canadian climate, which is gluten free and has double the antioxidants found in blueberries.

And Sheikh Halal Farms is satisfying the urban demand for halal food. It's the only Muslim-owned halal duck and chicken processing plant in Ontario, with a mission to provide products that are hand-slaughtered according to the rites of Islam. It's investing in new equipment to increase production of halal duck and chicken, building on its relationships with Ontario poultry and Mennonite farmers to increase capacity to meet growing demand.



FRESH CITY FARMS

Some of the diverse array of crops growing on urban farms around the GTA: Swiss chard, golden and red beets, garlic and cherry tomatoes.

Reducing your food miles...possible

To learn how the Greenbelt Fund is changing the way we eat and drink local in Ontario visit Greenbeltfund.ca/news



Possibility grows here.