

New & Updated Greenbelt Policies Aim to Support Farm Viability

A thriving agricultural sector is vital for our region and for strong rural economies. With the rapid growth experienced in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), one of the biggest threats to agricultural viability has been the loss of farmland to urban expansions. Since being established in 2005, one of the primary purposes the Greenbelt has been protection of farmland.

Stronger Protection for Farmland

The Greenbelt delivers the highest level of policy protection possible for farmland, thereby providing certainty for long-term planning/investment in agricultural infrastructure. Greenbelt policies are designed to prevent urban development from extending into the agricultural and natural heritage systems. The Greenbelt has stopped the loss of farmland inside its boundaries. In contrast, 7,500 hectares of farmland were lost in the rest of the GGH between 2005-2015¹.

What does not change for farmers in the Greenbelt?

Permitted Uses

The same full range of existing and new agricultural, agriculture-related and on-farm diversified uses and normal farm practices are permitted both within and outside of the Greenbelt. Municipalities are not allowed to adopt policies that restrict these permitted uses. Municipalities remain as the planning authority within the Greenbelt.

Land Prices inside the Greenbelt

Farmers in the Greenbelt face no restrictions on selling their land, and farmland in the Greenbelt has not decreased in value. According to MPAC and

RE/MAX data², land prices have risen steadily at 10% or more annually since the Greenbelt was established. Today, farmland in the Greenbelt can sell for as much as \$ 35,000 per acre in specialty crop areas (Holland Marsh and Niagara Tender Fruit Area). In Waterloo, farms already protected by a regional 'greenbelt' have the highest farm revenues in the province. The Greenbelt also deters land speculation which can drive up the price of farmland intended to be flipped for development.

Greenbelt Plan Recognizes Importance of Farming

Recent amendments made to the Greenbelt Plan (2017) resulting from input received from the farm community include policy language that:

- recognizes the value and importance of agriculture to the region;
- more explicitly balances farming needs and protection of the natural heritage system; and
- better supports farming in the Greenbelt.

The Greenbelt Plan emphasizes the primacy of agriculture over non-agricultural uses, explicitly stating that other land uses should not negatively impact agriculture. Where mitigation is required to protect agricultural uses, measures should be incorporated within the area being developed.

What are the main differences for farmers in the Greenbelt vs. Growth Plan Areas?

Increased Recognition for Agriculture:
Municipalities are encouraged to implement

¹ Land Use Planning and Agriculture: Measuring Farmland Conversion, Wayne Caldwell, Sarah Epp, & James Newslands, Presentation October 2016

² Toronto, Greenbelt farmland value increases up to 45%, March 2009, Eastern Ontario AgriNews; MPAC Market Snapshot, November 2012; Re/Max Market Trends, Farm Edition 2013

regional agri-food strategies. Impacts of development on the Greenbelt Agricultural System and planning for local food must also be considered by municipalities.

Lot Creation Policies Protect Minimum Farm Size: The Greenbelt Plan sets a minimum lot size of 100 acres in Prime Agricultural Areas but also allows for stronger municipal policies to apply. The Growth Plan does not set size limits and each municipality determines these for their area.

Natural Heritage System Policies: Farms inside and outside the Greenbelt have to conduct a natural heritage or hydrological evaluation if they are building within 120 meters of a key natural/hydrological feature. However, farmers in the Greenbelt Plan can skip this step and reduce red tape by automatically establishing a 30 meter buffer. Normal farm practices can still take place inside this buffer.

Key Hydrologic Areas: In these areas, new agricultural buildings (and proposals for major recreational uses) that are larger than 500 square metres are required to demonstrate that water functions will be protected. Under the Growth Plan, this requirement applies to larger developments, such as subdivisions.

Benefits of Permanent Protection

Agriculture is the predominant land use in the existing Greenbelt, making up half the total area. Farmland within the Greenbelt has permanent protection from urban development and data shows there has been no loss of farmland inside its boundaries since the Plan came into effect. Protecting the countryside from urban encroachments also helps demonstrate the importance of agriculture and agricultural related uses to the provincial economy.

Permanent farmland protection helps deter land speculation that can have negative consequences on the viability of agricultural

uses. Speculation drives up farmland prices, increases absentee ownership, and results in the loss of farm population, dwellings and community.

Preventing fragmentation of the agricultural system provides farmers with long-term certainty and enables ongoing investments in the land and farm operations.

It is critical to protect groundwater systems in the proposed Greenbelt expansion areas from development to ensure the long term viability of water supplies required for drinking water, agriculture uses and to sustain environmental features.

For more information please visit:
protectourwaters.ca



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