

PROTECTING WATER, GROWING THE GREENBELT: QUICK FACTS

What is the provincial study?

The provincial government has committed to increase the protection of hydrological (water) systems that are critical to maintaining water quality and quantity in the rapidly urbanizing Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH). To begin the process, the province has released a proposed study area and criteria for Greenbelt expansion, and is seeking input from the public and stakeholders on 'other factors' to be considered when mapping a proposed Greenbelt boundary. These include accommodating growth and protecting agriculture. This study is to explore the possibility of Greenbelt expansion. At a future time, the province will consult on a proposed expanded Greenbelt boundary.

Why expand the Greenbelt to protect water?

Headwaters, moraines, wetlands and other highly permeable rainwater recharge/discharge lands maintain abundant clean water supplies for residents, agricultural businesses and ecosystem health (including providing all-year base water flows to rivers and lakes). Currently, protection of these critical water resources is inconsistent across the GGH, with many areas experiencing water quality and quantity issues. A recent public review of the Greenbelt and Growth Plans recommended greater protection of water resources.

What protection policies apply? Will expansion affect property tax rates?

If the province moves forward in the future with Greenbelt expansion, it is important to note that only Greenbelt Plan policies will apply to lands that fall under expansion. **Expansion will not affect municipal property taxes.** Conformity to the Greenbelt Plan requires that the municipal governments bring Greenbelt policies into their Official Plans. There is no other agency involved.

What happens to agricultural land prices?

Farmers and other landowners do not face any restrictions in selling their land. Over the last 13 years, land in the Greenbelt has increased in value. In the case of farmland, land prices have risen steadily at 10% or more annually, according to MPAC and RE/MAX data. Farmland can sell for as much as \$ 35,000 per acre in the Greenbelt's specialty crop areas (Holland Marsh and Niagara Tender Fruit Area) and over \$10,000 per acre elsewhere, twice as high as farmland in any other province.

What about agriculture viability?

The Greenbelt supports the ongoing viability of agriculture and does not add red tape for farmers. Similar to farms outside the Greenbelt, all types, sizes and intensities of agricultural uses and normal farm practices are promoted and protected, along with a full range of agricultural uses, agricultural-related uses and on-farm diversified uses (Greenbelt Plan 3.1.3.1). In the Greenbelt municipalities are not allowed to adopt policies that restrict these permitted uses.

The Greenbelt Plan offers greater protection of agricultural lands and operations by preventing urban expansion onto farmland. This helps to provide certainty for farmers, protect investments and deter land speculation. No farmland in the Greenbelt was lost to development between 2005-2014, however, 7,500 hectares of farmland in the GGH (outside of the Greenbelt) has been lost to urban expansion.

In the Greenbelt, the impact or compatibility of any non-agricultural use or activity must consider the impact on farm operations. Actions to avoid, minimize or mitigate these impacts are to be incorporated into the non-agricultural use, as guided by the province. Municipalities are encouraged to develop Agri-Food Network Strategies to enhance the Agricultural System in Greenbelt and long-term economic prosperity.

Do my local water systems need more protection?

The Greenbelt expansion proposal addresses gaps in existing water protection policies. Greenbelt policies compliment Source Water Protection but go further by also maintaining groundwater volumes and quality for private wells, agriculture and ecosystem health. Greenbelt or natural heritage strategies protect natural cover in order to support plant and animal communities.

The Greenbelt Plan provides a stronger policy framework requiring 'conformity' of municipal planning documents vs. 'consistency' with the Provincial Policy Statement. Greenbelt policies are also oriented to 'improve or restore' natural systems. The Greenbelt sets higher minimum protection standards on more features (all wetlands, seepage areas and springs, smaller forest plots, 30m buffer). With few exceptions, municipalities can adopt stronger natural heritage protections in their Official Plans.

What about aggregates?

The Greenbelt Plan increases protections for natural heritage beyond the Provincial Policy Statement, in a few key areas (significant woodlots, wetlands and endangered species habitat). Industry also has an increased obligation to protect, maintain or enhance connectivity for natural, water and agricultural systems. There are also new aggregate rehabilitation requirements in the Greenbelt Plan. Unlike municipal policies, Greenbelt policies are in the provincial interest and at less risk of being challenged.

Where should development go?

The revised Growth Plan (2017) identified the amount of urban growth expected in the GGH until 2041. And municipalities are starting to calculate the amount of land needed to accommodate that growth. Information available shows that many will find they have more land than is needed (excess lands) to accommodate future growth. Pressures on local groundwater supplies are increasing and Greenbelt expansion will reduce the impacts of flooding, drought and will limit damaging land use activities in groundwater recharge areas.

Questions? Please visit protectourwaters.ca or contact Ontario Greenbelt Alliance, Susan Lloyd Swail, sswail@environmentaldefence.ca