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## **Stakeholder engagement to inform the 10-Year Coordinated Land Use Plan Review and the future success of Ontario's Greenbelt**

### **Summary of discussion from a virtual engagement session on Agriculture and Agri-Food**

#### **Introduction**

On Tuesday April 29, 2025, the Greenbelt Foundation hosted a 90-minute virtual engagement session to continue conversations identifying agriculture and agri-food priorities related to the Greenbelt. The purpose of this session was to revisit what we heard during an in-person roundtable discussion held in November 2024, refine key ideas, and discuss specific policy, implementation, or administrative changes in the Greenbelt Plans that would enhance protections against the loss and fragmentation of the agricultural land base and support working landscapes.

The session is part of a series of issue-specific stakeholder engagements held by the Foundation between November 2024 and June 2025 to inform our priorities for the upcoming 10-Year Coordinated Land Use Plan Review and long-term success of the Greenbelt, ensuring it remains effective and resilient for years to come and contributes to the sustainability of Ontario.

In addition to stakeholder engagement, the Foundation is also undertaking other activities in preparation for the Review including research and mapping projects to provide insights into emerging trends and pressures and support evidence-based decision-making. This includes the recent release of our housing report: *Housing Needs and Actions for the Agricultural Sector in Rural Greenbelt Communities*.

#### **Overview of Discussions**

The earlier Agriculture and Agri-Food roundtable session identified a range of issues and opportunities impacting the sector, including climate change and extreme weather, managing growth while continuing to protect farmland, municipal capacity challenges and the shifting policy landscape. Participants also considered strategies for balancing agriculture and environment objectives, and the evolving needs of the agriculture and agri-food sector. In addition, they proposed specific policy recommendations that would improve the effectiveness of the Plans (Appendix I). Select topics requiring further discussion were carried forward to the recent virtual engagement session. Memos summarizing the roundtable sessions can be found [here](#).

The recent virtual engagement session focused on the following policy topics:

- 1) On-farm diversified uses (OFDU).
- 2) Development pressures on farmland (including land redesignation and settlement expansion).
- 3) Infrastructure impacts on the Greenbelt.

A total of 19 people participated in the virtual engagement session. In general, participants noted that Greenbelt policies have been largely effective in protecting farmland. However, recent changes in Ontario's policy landscape, including the repeal of the Growth Plan and new municipal powers, have introduced uncertainty and heightened pressures on Greenbelt agriculture. The group emphasized that the Review must address both policy content and implementation to ensure the Greenbelt's farmland and agricultural systems are robustly protected going forward. Most of the discussion was focused on on-farm diversified uses and development pressures on agricultural lands.

### **Policy Issue #1 – On Farm Diversified Uses (OFDU)**

On-farm diversified uses (OFDU) are businesses or activities on farms that are secondary to the principle agricultural use and limited in size. Participants strongly support OFDUs as important activities that contribute to farm economic viability, help with succession planning and support rural economic development. Participants also identified policy challenges associated with OFDUs and the potential for negative impacts on agriculture. There was a consensus for:

- Ensuring OFDUs remain subordinate and related to the primary agricultural use.
- Updating provincial guidelines to provide clearer direction for municipalities, ensuring OFDUs support farmers and avoid downgrading the use of agricultural land or interfering with surrounding agricultural operations.
- Streamlining municipal processes to improve consistency in policy interpretation and implementation and reduce costs for farmers to develop OFDUs. Training and guidance documents were identified as key tools to support consistency in municipal interpretation, implementation, and enforcement of policies.
- Establishing clear definitions and thresholds for appropriate scale and size of OFDUs.

### **Discussion Highlights**

#### ***Clarify OFDU Policy to Protect Active Farmland***

Clearer policy direction is needed to ensure OFDUs are permitted only on active farms. Restricting OFDUs to lands that contribute to the agricultural economy helps maintain the integrity of prime agricultural areas and ensures land remains primarily in agricultural use.

#### ***Lack of Clear Scale Thresholds for OFDUs***

There is a need to establish clear thresholds to distinguish between appropriately scaled OFDUs and those that should be relocated to industrial or non-agricultural zones. Without this, there is a risk of inappropriate land use within agricultural areas.

#### ***Concerns About “Use Creep”***

Participants raised concerns about “use creep,” where non-agricultural businesses are allowed as OFDUs. Examples include battery storage facilities, trucking depots, and window sales businesses—activities that neither support nor relate to the farm operation and erode the intent of OFDU policies.

#### ***Inconsistent Municipal Interpretation***

Variability in how municipalities interpret and implement OFDU guidelines can create uncertainty, increase costs, and present regulatory barriers for farmers. Better definitions and size limits for

OFDUs, along with training initiatives for municipal planning staff would improve consistency in the approvals process.

### ***Need to Assess Cumulative Impacts***

There is support for OFDU as-of-right permissions. However, geographic and servicing limitations and cumulative impacts need to be assessed to avoid unintended land use conflicts and degradation of agricultural land. Rising demands and enforcement capacity need to be considered.

### **Resources/ Follow Up**

Participants shared various resources that provide further insights into strengthening OFDU policies and guidelines. Participants also expressed interest in hosting a roundtable discussion with OMAFA on improving the guidelines.

- [OMAFA Guidelines](#)
- [Wayne Caldwell Study](#)
- [Durham Region considers lessons learned in review of OFDU rules](#)
- Gather examples of municipal bylaws to address scale of operations

### **Policy Issue #2 – Development Pressures on Agricultural Lands**

Participants expressed significant concern that development pressures are increasing on farmland in the Greenbelt. Recent examples of farmland being targeted for non-agricultural development were discussed along with attempts to redesignate protected lands, and the implications of planning policy changes (including the repeal of the Growth Plan and the resulting loss of clarity around its strict controls on settlement expansion). There was strong consensus that farmland policies in the Greenbelt must be strengthened against these pressures. Participants were concerned that the cumulative effect of even small incursions could lead to the substantial erosion of the Greenbelt's integrity – described as “death by a thousand cuts”. The discussion emphasized the need for renewed provincial leadership and focused on the following policy areas:

- Preventing ad-hoc conversion or redesignation of prime agricultural lands by strengthening provincial oversights and enforcement mechanisms.
- Stronger rules preventing Greenbelt settlement area boundary expansions into Specialty Crop Areas (SCA) and prime agricultural lands and requiring that infill and intensification options are exhausted.
- Preventing the downloading of agricultural land mapping and designation authority to municipalities, to ensure consistent provincial standards.
- Expanding specialty crop designations, where appropriate.
- Requiring data-driven, evidence-based assessments to inform policy and land-use decisions.

### **Discussion Highlights**

#### ***Provincial Oversight Remains Essential***

Continued provincial oversight for mapping and protecting the Greenbelt's agricultural system is critical. Amid growing development pressures and increasing settlement boundary expansion

proposals, municipalities may face competing priorities that risk downgrading prime agricultural lands and altering land use designations. Greater autonomy granted to municipalities could further compound these challenges.

### ***Enforcement Gaps Undermine Greenbelt Protections***

Weak enforcement of existing provincial policies has diminished the effectiveness of polices protecting Greenbelt lands. Stronger mechanisms for oversight and compliance are needed. Examples were discussed where the province may be unaware of settlement area boundary expansions and land use redesignations. The Plans should clearly reinforce provincial control, monitoring and enforcement, especially for boundary expansions and land use redesignations.

### ***Support for Stronger Protections for Agricultural Lands***

Participants noted that policies governing Greenbelt settlement area boundary expansions - previously outlined in Growth Plan (2020) - remain unclear. There is strong support for greater restrictions, including explicitly prohibiting expansions into prime agricultural lands in line with policies for Specialty Crop Areas (SCAs), limiting boundary expansions to a onetime occurrence or every 10 years with strict controls, and requiring municipalities to demonstrate that all infill and intensification options have been thoroughly pursued. Further suggestions included exploring enhanced protections for high-value agricultural zones, such as the designation of additional SCAs.

### ***Data-Driven Decision-Making***

Improved data collection and monitoring are needed to assess farmland loss and prioritize protection efforts. In particular, the loss of provincial agricultural mapping creates a critical information gap that must be addressed.

### **Resources/ Follow Up:**

- Follow up on University of Guelph research to update data on farmland loss in the Greenbelt from 2017-2021.
- Discuss opportunities to designate additional Specialty Crop Areas for fruit and vegetable crops.
- Track information on municipal settlement area boundary expansion requests.

### **Policy Issue #3 – Infrastructure and Agricultural Fragmentation**

Participants noted the impact of large-scale infrastructure (e.g., highways, roads, transit lines, pipelines, utility corridors, etc.) on agricultural lands. These projects can bisect and fragment farm blocks, disrupt the agricultural system, and create new development pressures. While Greenbelt Plan policies currently allow infrastructure if there is a demonstrated need with no reasonable alternative, and require that agriculture-supportive infrastructure be prioritized, stakeholders agreed that these safeguards are either not being implemented or are not adequately protecting agriculture. With growing pressure for new highways and utilities across the region, the group saw a critical need to strengthen how infrastructure is planned and approved in the Greenbelt context.

Participants outlined two key challenges that need addressing:

- Preventing or mitigating the fragmentation of farmland by infrastructure.

- Ensuring infrastructure planning also considers and supports agricultural needs (e.g., farm access, drainage, utilities).

### **Discussion Highlights:**

#### ***Integrate Greenbelt Goals into Provincial Infrastructure Planning***

Greenbelt objectives should be embedded within broader provincial infrastructure plans to prevent disruption to agricultural operations and ensure long-term land use compatibility. For example, growth patterns or policies that require people to have long commutes will continue to increase infrastructure pressures in the Greenbelt. Transportation and other provincial plans should be aligned with Greenbelt goals.

#### ***Enhance Planner Capacity Through Training and Guidance***

Targeted training and the development of practical guidance documents for planners would strengthen awareness of best practices and mitigation measures that support agricultural viability during infrastructure planning and implementation.

### **Resources/ Follow Up:**

- Request to share examples or resources related to agriculture and infrastructure planning.

### **Next steps**

The Foundation would like to extend our appreciation for participants' time in attending the virtual engagement session and sharing your views and experiences. If you have more information or feedback for us, please contact us by June 27, 2025.

The Foundation has completed a total of ten issue-specific discussions on the upcoming 10-year Review with a broad group of stakeholders across the region. We are currently developing a comprehensive summary of key policy positions and recommendations. The summary will include input from roundtables held in November 2024 and the virtual sessions held this May. Memos from both sessions are available [here](#).

We look forward to continuing to engage with you to confirm alignment, agreement and support with our key areas of focus for the upcoming Review.

## **Appendix I. List of policy recommendations discussed at the November 2024 roundtable.**

Participants agreed that the Greenbelt is essential for farmland protection and managing growth. Several key recommendations to strengthen the effectiveness of the Plans and address emerging challenges were suggested, including the following:

- Strengthen legal protections to prevent land redesignation and provide transparent appeal processes.
- Policies need to remain flexible to support a working landscape.
- Address concerns about downgrading land use designations (e.g., redesignating prime agricultural land as rural, which opens it to multiple non-agricultural uses).
- Refine current policies, such as shoreline area policies, to ensure greater alignment across Plans, particularly in response to revisions to the Growth Plan.
- Establish clear and consistent guidelines for OFDUs to support agricultural viability while preventing misuse.
- Require municipalities near the Greenbelt to enforce intensification and density policies, ensuring that greenfield development occurs only after all opportunities for densification been fully explored.
- Explore the controlled intensification of Greenbelt hamlets to support local economies while preserving agricultural integrity.
- Assess the need for specific economic development policies in the Greenbelt Plan to promote sustainable farming and foster local agriculture-related businesses, both formal and informal.
- Reinstate Agricultural Impact Assessments (AIAs) for aggregate extraction on rural lands, and provide stronger, clearer rationales for municipalities to reject proposals that threaten farmland.
- Expand specialty crop area designations and strengthen restoration requirements for aggregate sites to better protect high-value agricultural lands from non-farm uses.
- Prioritize renewable energy infrastructure siting on previously developed land and avoid Class 1–4 farmland and specialty crop areas.
- Integrate a watershed systems approach to ensure a holistic understanding of Greenbelt assets and challenges across regional and municipal boundaries.
- Integrate Growth Plan policies into the Greenbelt Plan.
- Improve mapping tools for detailed soil and land classification to guide land use decisions.

**Appendix II. List of participants in the Agriculture and Agri-Food virtual engagement session.**

- Ontario Farmland Trust
- University of Guelph
- Conservation Ontario
- Environmental Defence
- Invasive Species Centre
- Food and Beverage Ontario
- Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association
- Grape Growers of Ontario
- Holland Marsh Growers Association
- National Farmers Union - Ontario
- Municipal and regional representatives from Durham, Niagara, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Port Colborne, and Mulmur