



## Summary of Key Takeaways from Roundtable Discussion on Agriculture & Agri-Food to inform the potential 10-Year Coordinated Land Use Plan Review and the future success of Ontario's Greenbelt

### Introduction

On November 5, 2024, the Greenbelt Foundation hosted a 4-hour roundtable session to explore emerging trends, pressures, and policy opportunities in the agriculture and agri-food sector. The session aimed to inform the Greenbelt Foundation's 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.

Below are the major themes and issues captured during the roundtable discussion on agriculture and agri-food. The information reflects the collective input of participants and provides an initial basis to further explore these issues and continue discussions and strategic considerations in preparation for the Review.

### Participants

Participants represented a diverse group of experts including farm organizations and associations, farmers, municipal and regional staff, researchers and industry groups. This included representation from the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, National Farmers Union–Ontario, Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association, Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance, Food and Beverage Ontario, Conservation Ontario, University of Guelph, Environmental Defence, as well as municipal and regional representatives from Clarington, Caledon, Durham and Niagara. Their collective expertise provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing agriculture in the Greenbelt.

### Trends & Pressures

Trends and pressures shared during the discussion highlight the growing implications of climate changes, land use compatibility issues, a shifting (and unpredictable) policy landscape, and the evolving nature of the agriculture and agri-food sector.

#### *Climate Change & Extreme Weather Events*

**Climate change is significantly impacting the agriculture and agri-food sector through more frequent and extreme weather events.** Participants highlighted how rising temperatures are increasing irrigation needs, while flooding damages crops and disrupts transportation systems vital to supply chains. Additionally, frequent freeze-thaw cycles are causing further crop damage and contributing to water quality issues due to increased runoff and reliance on road salt. Beyond extreme weather, farmers are also facing growing pressures from biodiversity loss and the spread of pests and diseases—challenges that are intensifying with climate change. Despite being on the frontlines and well-positioned to act, farmers often lack the necessary resources and support to respond effectively to these escalating threats.

Southern Ontario's unique stability as an agricultural region, bolstered by its quality soils, favourable climate, water resources, market access and processing facilities, are strengths for Ontario's agricultural sector in a changing climate. For these reasons, multinational corporations and other large-scale investors are increasingly



attracted to the region. This interest has also driven up land prices and contributed to farmland consolidation, posing challenges for smaller producers and new farmers.

### ***Balancing Farming & Growth***

**Unchecked rural growth, including urban-rural migration is straining infrastructure and creating conflicts with agricultural land uses.** Participants emphasized that housing demand pressures in the Greater Golden Horseshoe could be effectively addressed through urban infill development, which would protect farmland, reduce conflicts, and maintain the ecological and economic integrity of the region.

Expanding municipal services while preserving rural character poses significant challenges. Participants acknowledged the balance required between building essential infrastructure to support farms and rural communities and safeguarding agricultural land and heritage. There were concerns about how infrastructure investments, such as new roads or utilities, could unintentionally signal areas as open for development. Strong municipal planning, supported by robust provincial policy frameworks, was identified as critical for ensuring this balance is maintained. Municipalities are also facing financial pressures related to maintaining or expanding infrastructure.

**Concerns were raised that incompatible land uses in rural areas erode agricultural character and productivity.** On-farm housing is essential for labour-intensive agriculture, but there are concerns that Additional Residential Unit (ARU) policies outside the Greenbelt may inadvertently encourage unnecessary growth within it. Transportation conflicts were also highlighted, with increased traffic congestion and new or updated infrastructure often failing to account for the needs of farm equipment. These issues make it difficult for farmers to move goods and machinery safely and efficiently.

**Settlement boundary expansions threaten farmland, emphasizing the need for stronger protections and policies to limit urban development.** Participants expressed concerns that the loss of the Municipal Comprehensive Review process has weakened oversight and safeguards, increasing the risk of urban encroachment. There was strong support for maintaining existing settlement boundaries across the region and implementing stronger policies that prioritize urban intensification, limit boundary expansions, and reduce land use conflicts between rural and urban areas. Protecting farmland is not only crucial for food security and the agricultural economy, but also for upholding the broader objectives of the Greenbelt Plan.

### ***Municipal Capacity & Shifting Policy Landscape***

**Loss of experienced planning staff with agricultural expertise and institutional knowledge combined with the dissolution of upper-tier planning authority and diminished conservation authority responsibilities challenges the consistent application of policy across the Greenbelt.** Participants expressed concerns about whether lower-tier municipalities have the capacity and expertise to implement agriculture-related policies effectively and manage complex regional transportation issues that impact the sector.

**A lack of consistency in interpreting and implementing policies across provincial, regional and municipal governments was identified as a significant barrier to holistic planning.** The fragmentation of responsibilities and varied approaches were seen as obstacles to balancing agricultural, environmental, and growth needs effectively. The repeal of the Growth Plan has further exacerbated these challenges, leaving a



policy void that necessitates clearer provincial guidance and practical tools to support municipalities in navigating this evolving policy environment. Strengthening municipal expertise and creating clear frameworks for lower-tier municipalities will be critical for addressing complex agricultural, environmental, and growth challenges.

### *Balancing Agriculture and Environmental Objectives*

**Policies should recognize the mutual benefits of agriculture and environmental stewardship.** Farmland plays a critical role in supporting natural processes, such as stormwater management, soil conservation, and biodiversity support, yet this contribution is often overlooked and not compensated. Participants suggested that municipal programs often fail to account for rural landscapes and practices. Tailored approaches that integrate ecosystem goods and services and reflect the unique benefits of agricultural stewardship would support agricultural viability and community resilience.

**Some participants also called for improved clarity and updated policies for buffer zones, shoreline protection, and permitted uses (e.g., OFDUs).** Participants noted that clearer guidelines are needed to ensure these tools effectively support both environmental objectives and the viability of agricultural operations.

### *Evolving Nature of the Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector*

**Land consolidation, speculative investment, and the growing dominance of multinational corporations are reducing opportunities for smaller producers and creating barriers for new farmers entering the sector.** Many smaller-scale farmers are renting land from non-sector investors, which limits their ability to invest in long-term improvements such as soil health and food production. Additionally, the decline of food processing infrastructure in Southern Ontario, driven by corporate consolidation, has further strained smaller producers by complicating product storage and distribution.

**Opportunities exist to support sustainable farming through programs like ALUS and initiatives to strengthen local food systems.** However, participants expressed concern over scaling these programs and the prioritization of large-scale technology-based projects at the expense of smaller, more impactful solutions.

**Demand for farmgate sales and local food continues to rise, providing opportunities for innovation and diversification in the agricultural economy.** Consumers are increasingly seeking local products (e.g., "Foodland Ontario"), as well as immersive, farm-based experiences. The new National School Food Program and a growing number of new immigrants interested in farming and food production were identified as key opportunities to be explored. Policies that strengthen local food systems, encourage farmgate sales, and support small-scale sustainable farming initiatives are essential to counteract the challenges farmers face today.

### **Plan Effectiveness**

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.
- Revisit **buffer zone policies** to clarify their purpose and address potential unintended consequences, such as displacing growth. This underscores the importance of revisiting these policies with a clearer vision for their utility.
- 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 growth and 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.

## Process & Implementation Opportunities

Participants suggested several opportunities to enhance implementation and support the Greenbelt's long-term success:

- Assess the effectiveness of current Greenbelt policies in meeting their objectives to understand if they are delivering the desired outcomes, or if there have been unintended negative consequences.
- Explore ways to integrate Growth Plan policies into the Greenbelt Plan.



Possibility grows here.

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- Integrate a watershed systems approach to ensure a holistic understanding of the Greenbelt assets and challenges across regional and municipal boundaries.
- Explore partnerships and collaborations, including academics/researchers, planners, conservation authorities, and producers, to share information and data and help identify challenges and opportunities for agriculture in the Greenbelt.
- Ensure potential Greenbelt expansion is driven by the goals of the plan (i.e., high value land in proximity to development pressure).
- Prioritizing transportation strategies that limit vehicle traffic through the Greenbelt to reduce infrastructure pressures on agricultural operations and systems and curb the demand for development.
- Improve mapping tools for detailed soil and land classification to guide agricultural systems mapping and land-use decisions.
- Support small-scale agriculture-based industries while mitigating risks of misuse (e.g., explore ways to support agriculture-based home industry uses without opening up a loophole for non-agricultural uses).

### **Next Steps**

The Foundation would like to extend our appreciation for participants' time in attending the roundtable session and sharing your views and experiences. We look forward to continuing to collaborate and build on these initial discussions to refine priorities for the Review and address broader issues that are critical to the long-term success of the Greenbelt.