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Protecting Ontario's Greenbelt Through Strategic Policies

What is the Greenbelt?

Established in 2005, Ontario's Greenbelt is 2 million acres of protected farmland, forests, wetlands, rivers, and lakes in the Greater Golden Horseshoe region. These lands nourish us, safeguard our water, fight climate change, and enhance our quality of life.

The Greenbelt Foundation is the only charitable organization solely dedicated to investing in the Greenbelt's interconnected natural, agricultural, economic, and cultural systems, to ensure a working, thriving Greenbelt for all.

Understanding Greenbelt-Related Policies

Greenbelt Plan

The Greenbelt Plan, together with the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Niagara Escarpment Plan, identifies where urbanization should not occur in order to provide permanent protection to the agricultural land base and critical ecological and hydrological systems that sustain growth and rural economies in the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH).

Growth Plan and Provincial Planning Statement 2020

The GGH is Ontario's most populated and fastest growing region where 70% of residents live. It is also the economic engine of the province. Historically, the Greenbelt Plan has been integrated with complementary regional planning frameworks like the Growth Plan (2020) to guide where and how growth should occur and support the long-term conservation goals of the Greenbelt, including the sustainable use of its critical resources such as groundwater.

The Growth Plan was repealed in 2024. Regional coordination was not maintained in the new Provincial Planning Statement (PPS 2024) and instead provided for through an amendment in the Greenbelt Plan.

Amendment 4

On August 20, 2024, the Ontario government approved Amendment No. 4 to the Greenbelt Plan to maintain its current protections. Find the complete Amendment No. 4 [here](#).

Amendment No. 4 seeks to maintain Greenbelt protections and address ambiguities created with the repeal of the Growth Plan. The current lack of detail in Amendment No. 4 may unintentionally weaken existing protections unless the policies are made clear and embedded in the Greenbelt Plan or PPS.

Greenbelt Foundation and Amendment No. 4 Stakeholder Engagement

To support this outcome, the Greenbelt Foundation undertook a detailed comparative policy analysis of the former and new policy frameworks for the Greenbelt, identifying thematic gaps between the plans, inter-plan references that create dependencies and relevance and impact to



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the Greenbelt Area and Plans. Stakeholder interviews validated and refined our results and provided additional insights on Ontario's evolving land use planning policies and actions needed to strengthen Greenbelt protection to effectively address ongoing and emerging challenges.

Policies to Protect the Greenbelt

The Greenbelt Foundation has identified five areas that are key to maintaining policy protection standards and the long-term health of the Greenbelt and GGH. The following policy areas need to be addressed through Amendment No. 4 (see Appendix 1 for details):

1. Supporting Complete Rural Communities

Growth Plan policies guided growth in Greenbelt rural communities. These policies facilitated growth, promoting complete communities in Greenbelt towns, villages and hamlets, and protecting the region's agricultural and natural systems from fragmentation or scattered urban encroachment. Timing limits for expansions should specify the mandated 10-year Review cycle to replace the requirement for a Municipal Comprehensive Review process. See Growth Plan 2020 policy 2.2.8.3 (k) (Settlement Area Boundary Expansions) and 2.2.1.6 (Managing Growth).

2. Properly Managing Our Water Systems

The Greenbelt protects highly sensitive hydrological and groundwater systems and water quality and quantity for the region, including a safe source of drinking water for millions. Growth Plan policies ensured municipal water, sewage and stormwater servicing decisions were informed by watershed-scale planning, ensuring that services remained within capacity limits, avoided unintended consequences and costs and helped reduce flooding. By restricting Great Lakes water servicing in the Greenbelt, these policies further supported intensification and infrastructure optimization and helped avoid creating growth pressures in the Greenbelt. See Growth Plan 2020 policy 3.2.6 (Water and Wastewater Servicing and 2.3.7 (Stormwater Management).

3. Coordinate Infrastructure with Greenbelt Systems to Avoid Fragmentation

Growth Plan infrastructure policies required planning decisions align with Greenbelt agricultural and natural system protection goals, preserving connectivity and the long-term health and functions of these systems. See Growth Plan 2020 policy 3.2.5 (Infrastructure Corridors).

4. Preserve Farmland

Agriculture is a key part of Ontario's economy and food system. Growth Plan policies provided standardized tools for mapping the Agricultural System as well as the use of Agricultural Impact Assessments. These standards protected connectivity within the system, enabled growth overtime and avoided or mitigated development impacts on farming to ensure agriculture and the agri-food economy can thrive. See Growth Plan 2020 policy 2.4.6 (Agricultural System).



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5. **Safeguard Nature**

The Greenbelt isn't an island. Connectivity with natural systems outside its boundary is essential to its long-term health. Growth Plan policies that mapped the natural heritage system and prevented fragmentation worked together with the Greenbelt to protect wildlife across the region, including habitat for species at risk, maintain the water cycle and flow, and support community resilience to climate change. See Growth Plan 2020 policy 3.2.6 (External Connections) and 4.2.2 (Natural Heritage System).

What Are the Risks to the Ontario Without Strong Greenbelt Policies?

The Greenbelt remains a cornerstone of Ontario's commitment to sustainable land use planning. Supported by the recommendations outlined above, it can continue to serve as a model of regional conservation and sustainable development in an increasingly complex planning environment.

Additional changes to Ontario planning regime underline the importance of these policies. The loss of regional planning may challenge the need to coordinate development, including infrastructure investments and lead to inconsistent land use decisions. A more flexible infrastructure framework in Ontario may overburden water resource systems. The flexible 20-30 year planning horizons in the PPS need to align with the Greenbelt's long-term conservation goals and planning for housing and transportation in the region.

Without strong policies to protect the Greenbelt, Ontario risks:

- \$9.6 billion in economic impact every year and 177,700 full-time jobs
- 6.5 trillion litres of precipitation a year filtering and replenishing groundwater reserves, with 7 million Ontarians depending on the Oak Ridges Moraine for clean water alone.
- 750,000 acres of highly productive farmland, including one of the biggest fruit growing regions in the world, and farms earning 68% more revenue per acre than the average Ontario farm.
- \$3.2 billion in ecosystem services each year including flood protection
- Habitat protected for 78 species at risk
- Carbon offsetting potential of 71 million tonnes each year. Farmland makes up 40% of the protected Greenbelt, including rare Specialty Crop Areas: the Holland Marsh and the Niagara Tender Fruit and Grape Area. The Greenbelt's irreplaceable natural assets help mitigate against the impacts of climate change in Southern Ontario and make the region more climate resilient.

Based on this comparative analysis, the Greenbelt Foundation is now seeking to work collaboratively with the province to explicitly identify policies to be integrated into the Greenbelt Plan and/or Provincial Planning statement, as appropriate, to ensure the health and integrity of the Greenbelt. With thoughtful planning and the right policies in place, the Greenbelt can remain a model of smart conservation and sustainable development for years to come.

For more information about the Greenbelt and the work of the Greenbelt Foundation, visit greenbelt.ca or email research@greenbelt.ca.



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Appendix 1: Details on Specific Policies to Maintain Greenbelt Protection

1. The following criteria in Growth Plan (2020) under **policy 2.2.8.3(k) (Settlement Area Boundary Expansions)** imposed important limits on any boundary changes, including:

- A cap of 5% growth in geographic size, up to 10 hectares maximum;
- A requirement that no more than 50% of added land be used for residential purposes;
- Proof that the expansion supports complete communities or the local agricultural economy;
- Evidence that the proposed use cannot be reasonably accommodated within the existing boundary;
- Use of existing municipal water and wastewater systems without impacting intensification potential; and
- A firm prohibition on expansion into the Natural Heritage System.

2. Growth Plan (2020) **sections 3.2.6 (Water and Wastewater Systems) and 3.2.7 (Stormwater Management)** required municipalities to undertake coordinated, watershed-informed infrastructure planning that protected both the quantity and quality of water. These policies filled a vital gap in land use planning by linking servicing decisions to environmental limits and inter-municipal coordination—especially important for the Greenbelt Area, which contains and relies on highly sensitive hydrologic systems:

- Mandatory watershed-informed servicing master plans for water, wastewater, and stormwater, ensuring that cumulative impacts, climate adaptation, and long-term sustainability are considered in infrastructure design.
- Requirement that municipal water and wastewater expansions be subject to watershed-informed planning and not exceed the assimilative capacity of receiving environments, protecting hydrologic integrity and limiting diffuse environmental degradation.
- Prohibition on extending Great Lakes servicing to inland municipalities unless strict public health and planning conditions are met, thereby avoiding leapfrogging development pressures into rural areas near the Greenbelt.
- Full cost recovery planning for water and stormwater infrastructure, including long-term maintenance and retrofit strategies, to ensure that financial pressures do not drive unsustainable infrastructure expansion.
- Integrated stormwater policies requiring green infrastructure, low-impact development, and naturalized solutions that align with subwatershed and master planning frameworks, particularly for large-scale development.



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3. To maintain consistent protection for the Greenbelt Area's ecological and agricultural systems, the Greenbelt Plan should be amended to **incorporate the following components of former policy 3.2.5:**

- Encouragement of linear infrastructure co-location to limit landscape disruption;
- Protection of existing and planned infrastructure corridors to align with current and projected needs, as informed by PPS transportation and corridor policies;
- Mandatory agricultural impact assessments (or equivalent) as part of environmental assessments to demonstrate that impacts on the Agricultural System are avoided or minimized and mitigated where unavoidable;
- Mandatory environmental assessments addressing impacts on key natural heritage and hydrologic features, requiring avoidance first, and mitigation if avoidance is not possible;
- Specific transportation considerations, such as supporting rail-based movement, separating modes within shared corridors, and enabling intermodal connections; and
- Land use planning along infrastructure corridors must support the overarching objective of directing growth to settlement areas, avoiding sprawl into protected countryside lands.

4. The repeal of the Growth Plan (2020) creates gap in Greenbelt protections and risks the loss of a comprehensive and regionally integrated framework for the protection and enhancement of Ontario's Agricultural System. Incorporating these policies will ensure that the Greenbelt Plan remains aligned with best practices in agricultural planning and land use compatibility, while also helping to close policy gaps created by the repeal of the Growth Plan. **Key components of former policy 4.2.6 should be embedded** into the Greenbelt Plan:

- Recognition and designation of the Agricultural System for the GGH, including the provincial mapping of the agricultural land base and agri-food network;
- Protection of prime agricultural areas and specialty crop areas for long-term agricultural use;
- Compatibility policies that require avoidance, minimization, and mitigation of impacts where agricultural and non-agricultural uses interface, supported by Agricultural Impact Assessments (AIAs) where appropriate;
- Policies to maintain and enhance the geographic continuity of agricultural lands and their economic and functional ties to the broader agri-food sector;
- Discouragement of non-agricultural uses on existing lots of record designated for agriculture;
- Integrated planning of infrastructure and growth management to support agricultural land preservation and agri-food transportation logistics;
- Encouragement for municipalities to implement regional agri-food strategies, support local food systems, and establish agricultural advisory committees or liaison officers;
- Support for infrastructure and services that sustain the agri-food network, and mitigation of negative impacts where unavoidable.



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5. To prevent fragmentation of critical ecological features and corridors adjacent to or overlapping with the Greenbelt Area, the Greenbelt Plan should be amended to **incorporate key provisions from Growth Plan section 4.2.2**, including but not limited to:

- Mapped NHS overlays to support long-term biodiversity and watershed health;
- Development restrictions requiring no negative impacts on key natural heritage and hydrologic features, and that ensure at least 30% of developable area remains or is restored to natural vegetation;
- Prohibitions on exceeding 25% disturbed area and 10% impervious surface for most developments;
- Minimum 240-metre connectivity corridors between features;
- Clarity that these protections apply even before mapping is fully implemented, and flexibility for municipalities to refine provincial mapping at the time of implementation;
- Recognition that agricultural uses may be permitted but subject to related environmental policies; and
- Direction for how NHS-designated areas are treated in the event of settlement area expansions, including a requirement that ecological functions and connectivity must continue to be maintained, restored, or enhanced.