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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The Growth Plan was repealed in 2024.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 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.



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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:

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).

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).



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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. Its diverse and vibrant ecosystems clean our air and water, provide home for wildlife, and ensure our communities have greenspace to explore.

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