



Possibility grows here.

Greenbelt Foundation

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Backgrounder: Global Greenbelts Report

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Prepared By: Greenbelt Foundation

Overview

A new report published by the Greenbelt Foundation, *Greenbelts Around the World Responding to Local and Global Challenges*, seeks to better understand Ontario's Greenbelt within a global context. The report analyzes eight international greenbelt case studies to identify trends, threats and opportunities with a focus on nature-based solutions to climate change, outdoor recreation and tourism, growth management and the agricultural system.

Background

The new report provides an update on how greenbelts around the world have evolved since the Greenbelt Foundation's previous global study was published in 2010. Researchers investigated how greenbelts are adapting to respond to current and emerging conditions in different regions across the planet. The study was conducted based on a review of academic literature, government policy, media articles, and interviews with international greenbelt experts. The insights gained are aimed to provide general recommendations for greenbelts and specific guidance for the Ontario Greenbelt.

The purpose of this report was to update the [2010 report](#) with a new version that will:

1. Reflect upon recent political, institutional and policy changes, progress on meeting goals, and emerging changes in the cities and regions reviewed in 2010;
2. Incorporate additional greenbelts not included in 2010, which are relevant to this updated research; and
3. Identify lessons learned from other contexts that can be applied to Ontario's Greenbelt.

This report features eight greenbelts:

- British Columbia's Agricultural Land Reserve, Canada;
- Copenhagen Green Wedges, Denmark;
- European Green Belt;
- Green Heart, the Netherlands;
- London Metropolitan Green Belt, England;
- Melbourne's Green Wedges, Australia;
- San Francisco Bay Area Greenbelt, USA;
- São Paulo City Green Belt Biosphere Reserve, Brazil.

Some greenbelts were not included in this research, including cases in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Comparative research in these geographical contexts would be challenging due to different institutional and political structures, informal land-use systems and rapid urbanization rates seen in those cases.

Key findings



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Protection of greenbelts remains strongly supported by the public, but dynamics that undermine greenbelt areas have increased since the research was last conducted in 2010. Pressure from housing and other developments is a common threat across international greenbelts. Other concerns include expansion of highways and transportation corridors, changing boundaries, lack of leadership by senior levels of government, overdevelopment of tourism infrastructure, impacts of climate change, and intensive farming practices.

Many greenbelts are located in or adjacent to rapidly growing regions where further growth is either planned or anticipated, and policymakers are often under pressure to release protected land for new development. Housing affordability is not a unique challenge to Ontario but encroaching on Greenbelt boundaries is not the solution. Case studies show that development in protected areas has not solved the housing affordability challenges in other regions. For example, in Melbourne, there were multiple changes between 2003 and 2012 to urban boundaries to allow residential development. The expansions removed incentives for efficient land use and fuelled land speculation in near-urban areas. Urban growth also had an impact on the region's agricultural system, called the "Foodbowl," which contributes about \$2.45 billion annually to the regional economy and provides 40 per cent of food supply, but that is predicted to drop to 20 per cent as the population increases.

Political leadership is critical for greenbelts to succeed. While lower tiers of government often implement policies, upper tier monitoring, reporting and oversight is needed to ensure the continued function of natural and agricultural systems across jurisdictional boundaries. An international example that highlights this importance is the Netherlands, where the Green Heart was removed as a national planning concept in 2012, and its responsibility was delegated to individual provinces. This has resulted in inconsistent policy implementation, a lack of cohesive vision for the Green Heart and development being permitted within protected areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic affirms the importance of greenbelts for public health and well-being. But that has also increased the demand for access to natural spaces and housing in suburban and rural areas, which combined have placed further strain on greenbelts. Greenbelt policy goals have become increasingly multifunctional and are expected to fulfill more objectives than ever before. Research found that the role and function of greenbelts are under increasing pressure to be all things to all people.

Policymakers and the public are becoming increasingly aware about the important role that greenbelts play in climate change resilience. The environmental benefits of protected agricultural and natural areas are multifaceted and include carbon and water storage, flood mitigation, water filtration, and habitat for animal and plant species. For example, England's London Metropolitan Green Belt is seen as the "green lungs" of the city since it helps to meet objectives of the 25-year national environmental plan through carbon storage, reducing urban heat and protecting woodland areas.

Strong public awareness and support are important for the long-term protection of greenbelts, and this is especially critical as research shows that greenbelt policies are most often vulnerable to development and political pressures. It is important to maintain a strong sense of connection between residents and their greenbelt through public education programs, and promotion of tourism, recreation and local food. An international example of such a community campaign is São Paulo, where there are a variety of agritourism and ecotourism programs in the greenbelt biosphere reserve.



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Key recommendations for Ontario's Greenbelt

The study authors found that Ontario's Greenbelt is a valuable food source and an integral part of the economy, as the region grows more than 40 per cent of the province's fruit and tree nuts and 15 per cent of vegetables. The research highlights that the work done by the Ontario Greenbelt Foundation, which is unique among the case studies, has been instrumental in the success of the Greenbelt Plan.

Compared to most Greenbelts studied, Ontario's is relatively well-insulated from potential harm from changes in government and other shifts, owing to a history of cross-party support, strong public approval, and embedded protections in planning and growth management legislation.

Ontario's Greenbelt continues to be a best practice in greenbelt planning, given the strength of the Greenbelt Act and integration of the Greenbelt Plan with the Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan. This report confirms the importance of maintaining firm boundaries to achieve Greenbelt policy goals.

Municipalities are the main implementers of provincial land-use planning policies, including the Greenbelt Plan and GGH Growth Plan. Up-to-date and consistent guidance and education from the provincial government on how to implement policies would support the achievement of goals.

About Greenbelt Foundation

Greenbelt Foundation is a charitable organization, solely dedicated to ensuring the Greenbelt remains permanent, protected and prosperous. We make the right investments in its interconnected natural, agricultural, and economic systems, to ensure a working, thriving Greenbelt for all. Ontario's Greenbelt is the world's largest, with over two million acres of farmland, forests, wetlands and rivers working together to provide clean air, fresh water, and a reliable local food source.

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