



Summary of Key Takeaways from Roundtable Discussion on Natural Heritage Systems & Biodiversity to Inform the potential 10-Year Coordinated Land Use Plan Review and the future success of Ontario's Greenbelt

Introduction

On November 6, 2024, the Greenbelt Foundation hosted a 2-hour roundtable session to explore emerging trends, pressures, and policy opportunities related to the natural heritage system and biodiversity. 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.

The following sections summarize the major themes and issues discussed, reflecting participants' collective input and providing an initial basis for further exploration and strategic considerations in preparation for the Review.

Participants

The roundtable brought together experts from conservation authorities, municipal and regional governments, Indigenous-led and non-profit organizations, and farm organizations. Participants included the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Conservation Halton, Credit Valley Conservation, City of Markham, Town of Ajax, Halton Region, Plenty Canada, Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Network, Bruce Peninsula Biosphere Reserve, and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing natural heritage systems and biodiversity across the Greenbelt. Additional written feedback was provided by Ontario Nature and the Niagara Escarpment Foundation.

Trends & Pressures

Trends and pressures shared during the discussion highlight that the Plans have effectively protected the natural heritage system, but the Greenbelt continues to face pressures from urbanization, shifting provincial policies and priorities, and increasing demands on natural, water, and agricultural resources.

Urban Development & Growth

The Greenbelt Plans provide strong protections for natural heritage, using sound planning principles to delineate where urbanization should and should not occur—however, these protections are increasingly strained by rapid urbanization, particularly in environmentally sensitive Greenbelt “fingers” and developments abutting the boundary. Participants noted that these pressures have led to the redesignation of Prime Agricultural land to Rural land inside the Greenbelt, and the approval of amenities and infrastructure that service adjacent urban developments versus rural communities.

The expansion of linear infrastructure is fragmenting the landscape, raising concerns about ecological connectivity and biodiversity. While municipalities are increasingly interested in mitigation measures to reduce wildlife mortality, they lack clear guidance for effective implementation. These challenges are compounded by inconsistent provincial decision-making and continued proposals to take land out of the Greenbelt.



Provincial Policy Changes

Changes to provincial planning policies and legislation are creating uncertainty, with a growing perception that the need for housing is disregarding the value of natural heritage and agricultural systems. Key concerns among participants include updates to the Provincial Planning Statement (PPS), particularly around settlement area boundary expansions, farmland loss, and lot fragmentation. While the Greenbelt Plans provide stronger protections for agricultural and natural systems, support for these fundamentals may erode. Additionally, the loss or degradation of agricultural and natural features and systems outside the Greenbelt are connected to the systems the Greenbelt is intended to protect and enhance.

The removal of third-party appeal rights under Bill 185 was identified as a major setback for community organizations, who have a long history of advocating for farmland and natural heritage protection through the Ontario Land Tribunal. This change limits community oversight and accountability in land use decisions. Participants also raised concerns about the continued approval of Minister's Zoning Orders (MZOs) and Official Plan amendments that add pressure to the Greenbelt; actions seen as contradictory to the Greenbelt Act and further contributing to policy inconsistency.

Stewardship and Management of Greenbelt Systems

A greater emphasis is needed on supporting effective stewardship and management models to sustain ecosystem functions long-term. While the Greenbelt's natural heritage protections have been effective, continued management is required to maintain ecosystem functions critical for mitigating and adapting to climate change. Forest ecosystems, for example, are increasingly vulnerable to invasive species and diseases, such as those affecting Ash, Beech, and Elm populations, leading to biodiversity loss across urban and rural areas.

Farmers, as the largest group of private landowners in the Greenbelt, play a critical role in stewardship with opportunities to strengthen both agricultural and natural heritage systems through nature-based solutions and ecosystem services. For instance, stormwater charges could be restructured to incentivize farmers to adopt nature-based solutions, reducing flood risks while enhancing agricultural productivity. Other challenges, such as the lack of investment in unused or leased farmland that degrades soil health and biodiversity could be addressed through enhanced financial incentives and expanded stewardship programs.

Intensifying growth pressures have increased interest in farmland protection among farmers but with a corresponding interest in ensuring policy flexibility that supports agricultural viability. Housing development encroachment into rural and prime agricultural areas impacts farm operations, including the possible displacement of livestock operations due to Minimum Distance Separation regulations. Protection of farmland must also consider the impact of natural heritage policies on activities such as On-Farm Diversified Uses (OFDUs) which provide an avenue to improve farm viability and attract younger generations to farming. Clearer guidance and consistent regulations are also needed to ensure any permitted OFDUs align with agricultural, natural heritage, and water resource objectives.

Participants also noted concerns around the fragmentation of agricultural landscapes by non-farm residential development, such as recreational and estate homes. These dwellings can erode the farm community fabric,



reduce the availability of farm services, and contribute to land use conflicts. Maintaining a strong and cohesive agricultural base was seen as vital to both economic and environmental outcomes.

Demand on the Natural Heritage System

The rising trend in outdoor recreation presents both opportunities and challenges for greenspace management. Increased public interest has led to positive outcomes, such as more memberships and fundraising opportunities to protect additional land. This rapid growth in use, however, has highlighted challenges, including insufficient greenspace, accessibility issues, and mounting pressures on biodiversity from overuse. To meet these demands, more large parks and dedicated resources to maintain biodiversity and manage invasive species are needed. Balancing the growing public demand for greenspace with the need for sustainable natural heritage management remains a critical priority.

Plan Effectiveness

The Greenbelt has effectively protected the region's natural heritage systems, safeguarding critical habitats, including those for species at risk, while maintaining and restoring key natural features. It provides long-term guidance for managing natural heritage and water resources, integrating these priorities into development, infrastructure, agriculture, and stewardship efforts. To address emerging challenges and further strengthen its effectiveness, several key recommendations have been proposed:

- **Integrate Indigenous-led conservation into the Plans' principles**, supporting Truth and Reconciliation through collaborative approaches. This could include recognizing ongoing work, incorporating cultural botany surveys, and embedding Indigenous knowledge and stewardship practices into policy frameworks.
- **Strengthen countryside policies to emphasize the complementary relationship between natural heritage and agricultural systems.** Update language in the Plans to highlight the importance of strong boundaries and connectivity of core areas, building on previous policy discussions and frameworks to clarify how these systems work together.
- Identify and implement changes to **enhance climate change-related policies**, particularly in addressing the intensifying pressures of growth and planning at the edges of the Greenbelt boundary.
- **Develop clearer policies on permitted uses within the Greenbelt fingers**, ensuring these areas are not overburdened with infrastructure and amenities supporting urban areas outside the Greenbelt and incorporate restoration objectives to maintain the integrity of these spaces while addressing regional pressures.
- **Strengthen plans to assist with natural asset management planning.** Address gaps in provincial regulations, including the lack of mandates for implementation and the exclusion of private lands, to ensure comprehensive and effective management.
- **Review OFDU policies** by prioritizing OFDUs on rural land rather than prime agricultural or speciality crop land, aligning with the Plan's objectives.



- **Review buffer policies** that can be punitive, as large buffers may act as a disincentive rather than an incentive for conservation.
- **Introduce a clear performance framework** to monitor and evaluate Plan effectiveness, using consistent indicators and formal accountability mechanisms. Consider amendments to the Greenbelt Act to embed long-term monitoring and reporting requirements.

Process & Implementation Opportunities

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

- Use watershed planning as a key tool to integrate natural heritage systems, biodiversity, and natural features into a cohesive framework, incorporating current conditions and future scenarios to measure cumulative impacts.
- Identify and develop tools needed for effective biodiversity planning, including programming, operations, and investments for both public and private lands. Leverage existing data from municipalities, the Province, and conservation authorities to guide decision-making and prioritize conservation efforts.
- Develop and share best practices tailored for municipalities to implement road ecology/mitigation measures.
- Address the lack of incentives and the punitive nature of some conservation policies that discourage landowners from supporting stewardship activities. Suggestions included introducing enhanced financial benefits for investments in soil health and biodiversity and expanding cost-share programs for restoration and conservation efforts.
- Create a clear guidance document for Additional Residential Units on prime agricultural lands under the PPS.
- Address the challenges in implementing the Greenbelt Plans by shifting perspectives and behaviours to embrace pragmatic solutions using existing tools and technologies. Build understanding of how the Greenbelt connects to broader environmental and social issues and promote active participation in achieving its goals.

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.