

Securing Ontario: A Public Vision for the Greenbelt Review



ontario greenbelt alliance

Introduction

2025: The Year of the Greenbelt

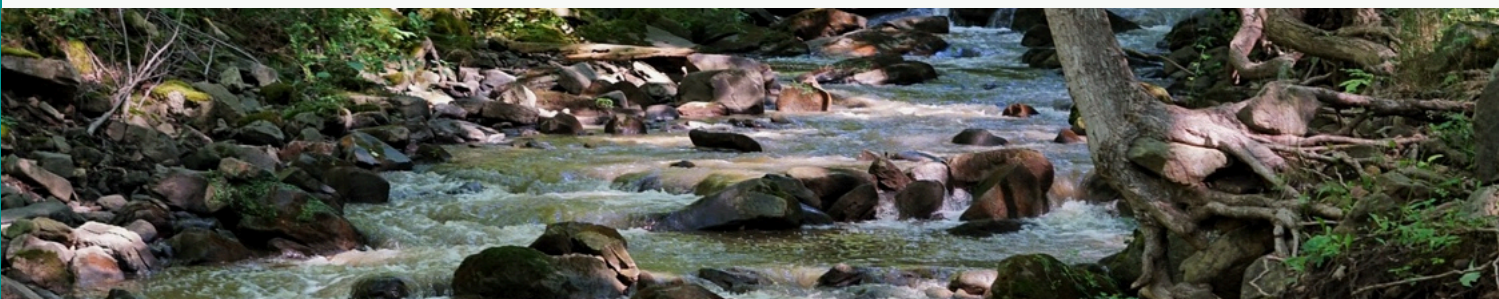
2025 marks a pivotal moment in Ontario's environmental and political history. It is the 20th anniversary of the Greenbelt, which coincides with a mandatory review that provides a perfect opportunity to protect, strengthen and expand on the successes of this public policy.

The Greenbelt is one of Ontario's most beloved public assets. It protects the water we drink, the farmland that feeds us, and the natural systems that shield communities from flooding, drought, and climate extremes. Polls consistently show that a strong majority of Ontarians support protecting and expanding it—across regions, ages, and political lines.

As a result of the last Greenbelt review in 2015, a clear path forward was charted: expert panels, planners, scientists, and civil society organizations all pointed to the same conclusion—the Greenbelt must grow to keep pace with worsening threats to water, farmland, and climate stability. That evidence was gathered, but never acted upon.

This review is more than a policy update. It's a test of leadership, trust, and long-term vision. Ontario can continue down a path of short-term sprawl and speculation—or it can act on what it already knows, correct course, and build a future rooted in care, evidence, and public interest.

The Greenbelt was never meant to be frozen in time. It was designed to evolve as the threats evolved. Now is the time to continue what was started - strengthen and expand the Greenbelt.



Water: What the Province Knew - Then Ignored

The Ontario government knew our drinking water was at risk. Several agencies outlined their concerns about water quantity being outstripped by unchecked growth.

- In 2014, 12 of 19 or 63% of Source Water Protection Agencies indicated water quantity threats. The Auditor General reported these findings to the government.
- In 2015, Coordinated Land Use Report by David Crombie echoed water concerns and the panel advised that water policies needed to be strengthened including expanding the Greenbelt into areas of hydrological significance.
- In 2017, MMAH launched “Protecting Water for Future Generations” and proposed Greenbelt expansion to protect areas of key hydrological significance. Key candidate areas were where the province’s data indicated groundwater supply could be limited for growth demands.

The solution was expand the Greenbelt to protect our sources of drinking water before it’s too late. However, to date, no actions have been taken on these recommendations and solutions to maintain our water security. For more details on areas of water stress, refer to Appendix 1.

Did You Know?

- The Greenbelt supplies drinking water to more than **seven million** people in Ontario
- The Greenbelt provides **\$3.2 billion** of water purification, flood prevention and other ecosystem services each year



Farmland: The Crisis We Measured - Then Ignored

The Ontario government knew farmland was disappearing fast. That is a direct threat to our food security and affordable food.

- 1996-2016: Ontario lost 1.5M acres of farmland or 175 acres per day.
- 2015: Crombie's Coordinated Land Use report outlines key concerns about farmland loss and the need to expand farmland protections.
- 2016: Census outlines that farmland loss doubled to 319 acres of farmland lost per day in Ontario. Later research shows that 99.8% of farmland lost during this time was land **outside** of the Greenbelt's protection. See Appendix 2 for more details.
- 2017: Ministry of Food and Agriculture begins to map out agricultural systems and stronger policy protections to stem the loss.
- 2018 Greenbelt expansion proposal, which would have protected more farmland, was shelved.

Since then the increased use of Ministerial Zoning Orders, changes to growth policies and a focus on sprawl and highways has put more farmland and our food security at risk. With trade wars and tariffs, being able to feed ourselves should be a national and provincial priority.

Did You Know?

- The Greenbelt contributes **\$4.1 billion annually to Ontario's GDP (2020)**
- Protects **750,000 acres** of prime agricultural land
- Contributes to Ontario's **\$7.4 billion** agri-food export industry



Climate: Warnings Ignored, Risks Rising

Reports started circulating more widely with provincial agencies as early as 2008 discussing the impacts of climate on our drinking water, flooding and public health.

- 2014: Ontario's first Climate Change Action Plan and closing Ontario's last coal-fired gas plant-Canada's single most significant climate action to date
- 2015: Crombie's report outlines that the Greenbelt is key to Ontario's climate change fight storing 165 tonnes of carbon and contributing \$224 M/year in avoided climate damages.
- 2016: A more robust Climate Action Plan that directly links curbing urban sprawl and investing in green infrastructure (like the Greenbelt) to climate actions is published.
- 2017: Environmental Commissioner of Ontario, Dianne Saxe, warns that Ontario needs to take climate change even more seriously. She famously said that sprawl is Ontario's so-called tar sands.
- 2018: Plans to expand the Greenbelt over our natural carbon sinks, like wetlands and forests, were shelved.

Since then the Ontario government has abandoned most of Ontario's climate initiatives and programs. The province doesn't have an updated climate action plan despite its own Climate Change Impact Assessment stating that Ontarians will be significantly impacted (See Appendix 3). A larger, stronger Greenbelt could be a significant ally.

Did You Know?

- The Greenbelt stores ~**87M tonnes** of carbon
- That stored carbon amounts to **\$366 M** in avoided climate costs annually
- Each year the Greenbelt contributes **\$3.2B** of environmental services



How This Review Could Get Us Back on Track

Course-correcting during a climate and biodiversity crisis—while facing global tensions and rising living costs—isn't simple. But here are three key steps that can leverage the value and strengths of the Greenbelt and its connected ecosystems.

1 Create a stronger and larger Greenbelt

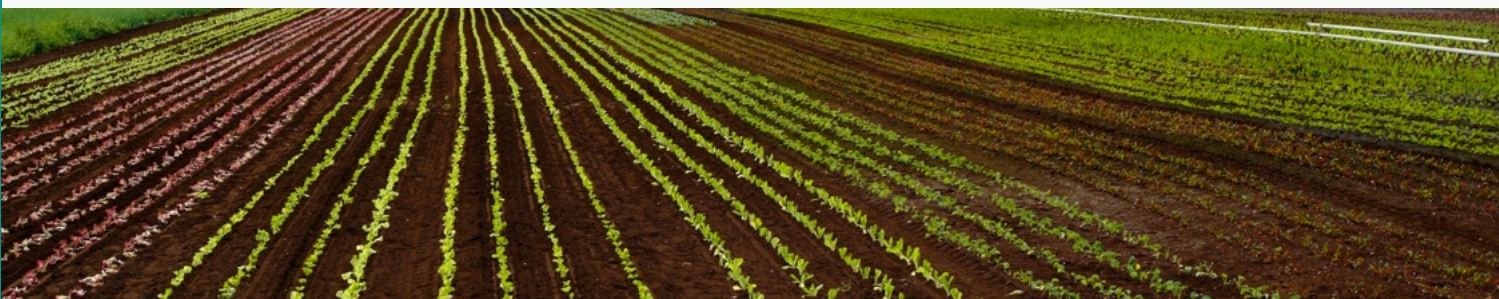
Using the Greenbelt review, undertake a transparent and evidenced-based process to expand and strengthen the Greenbelt. Key areas should focus on increasing water security, food security and climate resilience. Land swaps, take outs or a weakening of existing policies must be avoided.

2 Align housing and transportation priorities to build better communities where services already exist

Use the Greenbelt and strong urban boundaries to create communities that are affordable, healthy and climate resilient. Not only is this a significant climate action, it is also a fiscally responsible approach to creating housing where people need it. Invest more heavily in transit and walkable communities and less in highways that only facilitate more sprawl.

3 Implement monitoring and rehabilitation programs

Across the Greenbelt and Greater Golden Horseshoe, we need better data to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent efficiently and that government initiatives deliver the greatest impact for people, water, farmland, and climate. That means consistent, publicly available monitoring of water security, food security, and climate resilience. We also need clear targets—and real action—to restore forest cover, wetlands, and water systems.



Essential Outcomes for the Greenbelt Review

The Greenbelt Review must:

- **Hold the line.** Maintain or expand current boundaries. No removals, swaps, or carve-outs.
- **Safeguard farmland.** Stop the loss and fragmentation of agricultural land vital to Ontario's food security.
- **Protect water systems.** Strengthen protections for wetlands, aquifers, and headwaters that support ecological and human health.
- **Follow the science.** Base decisions on climate data, prioritizing carbon sinks, floodplains, and landscapes that buffer climate extremes.
- **Respect Indigenous rights.** Honour Treaty Rights and implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action related to land and resource management, including adopting and upholding UNDRIP. (Calls to Action 43-45).
- **Stop sprawl.** Freeze urban boundary expansions and focus new housing inside existing communities.
- **Strengthen enforcement.** Guard against aggregate extraction, sprawl infrastructure, and pollution, with clear restoration targets.
- **Expand wisely.** Add critical hydrological and agricultural systems to the Greenbelt based on evidence and public input.
- **Defend stronger protections.** Oppose any attempt to harmonize Greenbelt policies downward. If alignment occurs, the strongest rules must apply across the entire system.

This review is our chance to continue what Ontario started: a Greenbelt that truly protects what matters most. A Greenbelt that grows with the challenges we face. If we get it right, we'll leave behind more than protected land. We'll leave a legacy of clean water, secure food, and climate resilience for everyone who calls this place home.



Separating Myth from Reality on the Greenbelt

Some developers and speculators often point to the Greenbelt as the cause of Ontario's housing crisis. The reality is different: Ontario already has ample land available for new homes, and experts agree land supply isn't the issue. The Greenbelt becomes a convenient scapegoat because weakening it would unlock huge profits. That's why the myth persists — even though the real barriers are zoning, sprawl, and policy choices, not protected land. See Appendix 4 for more detailed information.

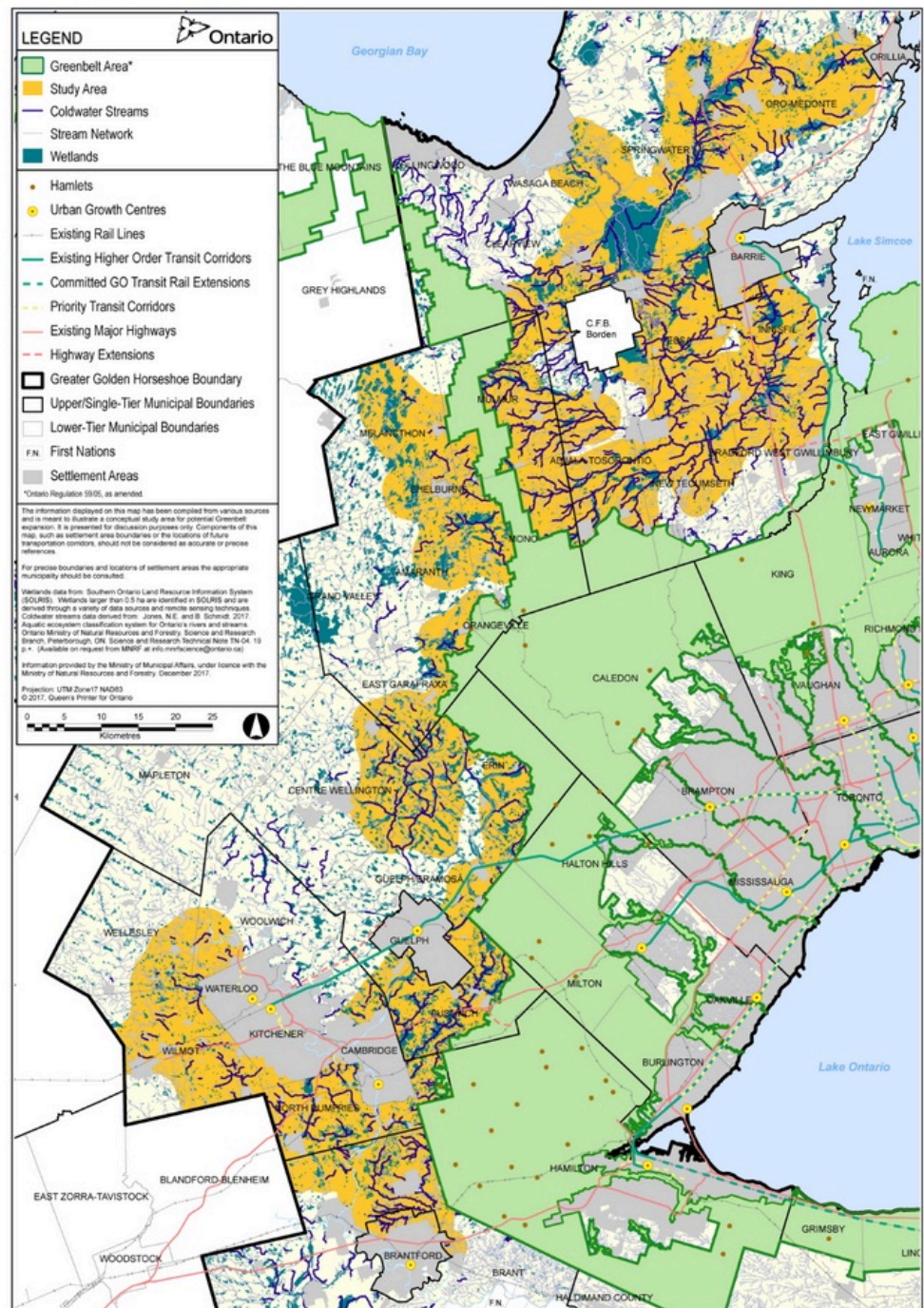
Myth	Reality
"Ontario is running out of land for housing."	"But a shortage of land isn't the cause of the problem. Land is available, both inside the existing built-up areas and on undeveloped land outside greenbelts." — Ontario Housing Affordability Task Force, 2022 (p.10)
"The Greenbelt drives up housing costs."	Housing experts agree the problem is zoning and sprawl, not the Greenbelt. "As of right zoning... will get more housing built in existing neighbourhoods more quickly than any other measure." — Task Force (p.11)
"Opening up the Greenbelt will make housing more affordable."	Protecting farmland and natural systems is essential to long-term affordability. "Greenbelts and other environmentally sensitive areas must be protected, and farms provide food and food security." — Task Force (p.11)

Appendix 1: Water Priority Areas

Mapping from Municipal Affairs and Housing outlines areas where hydrological features were key candidates for Greenbelt protection.

The yellow area denotes study areas of water stress. The blue areas denote significant wetlands and cold water streams. Both of these hydrological features are in decline and are vital to a healthy watershed and water supply.

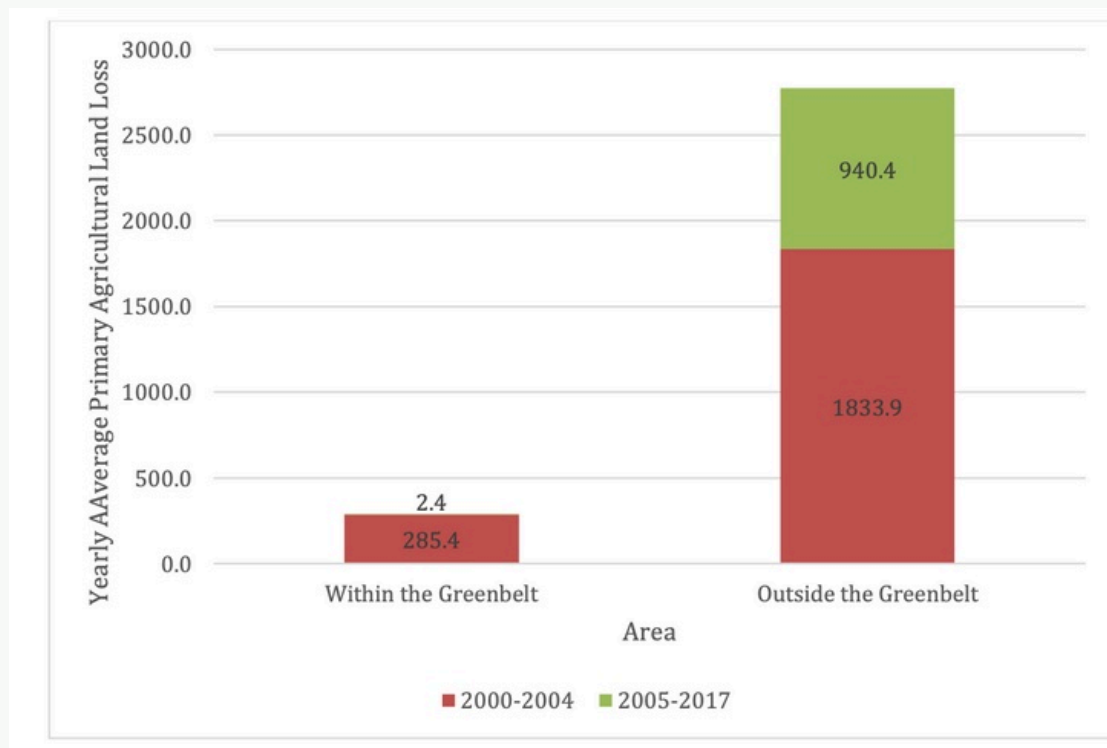
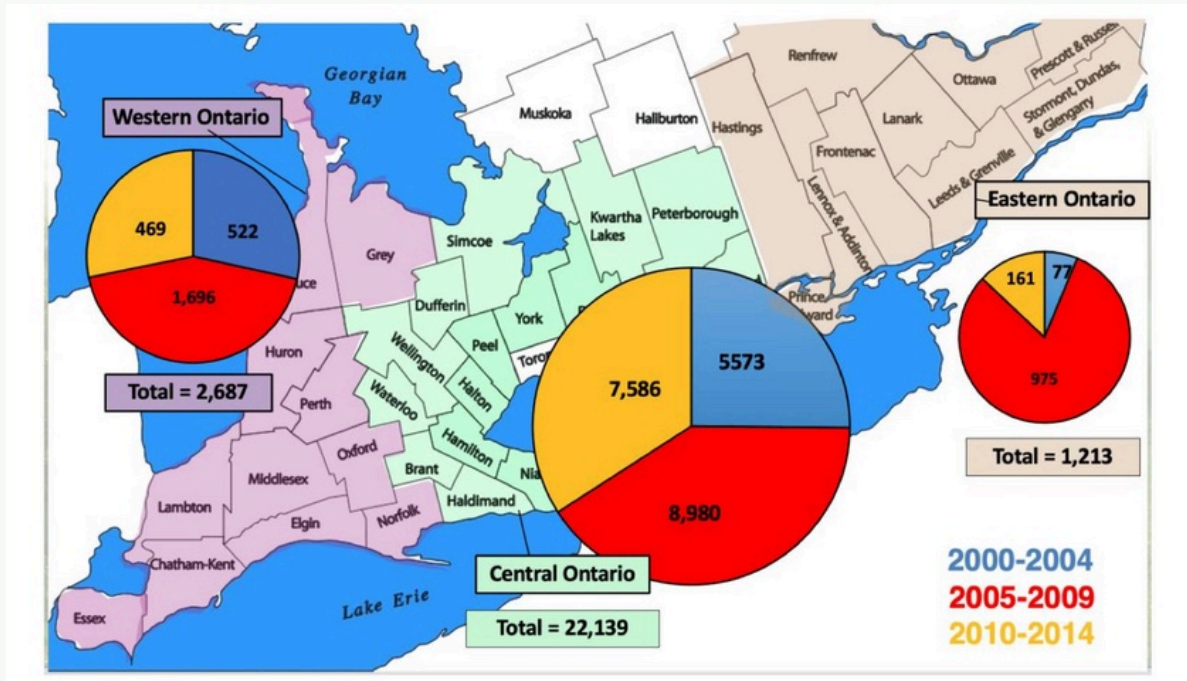
APPENDIX 1: STUDY AREA BUILDING BLOCKS MAPS
Coldwater Streams and Wetlands



Source: MMAH. Protecting Water for Future Generations Report (2017)

Appendix 2: Farmland Loss in Ontario

Data from Caldwell and Epp (2021) provided a more detailed picture of farmland loss outlined by census data. Their conclusions were definitive that the Greenbelt significantly reduced the loss of farmland within the protected areas.



Source: Caldwell, W. & Epp, S. (2021). Measuring Farmland Loss: Quantifying the Conversion of Prime Agricultural Land To Non-Farmland Uses Across Southern Ontario. <https://www.waynecaldwell.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/volume-1-FINAL.pdf>

Appendix 3: Climate Impacts in Ontario

Ontario's Climate Change Impact Assessment (2023) makes it clear: Ontario's food security and water sources are already at risk from climate change. The highest risks are concentrated in southern Ontario — often within or right beside the Greenbelt. Strengthening and expanding Greenbelt protections into these areas is common sense if we want to safeguard farmland, water, and communities against escalating climate impacts. Figures below courtesy of Ontario's Climate Change Impact Assessment report.

Figure 13.1: Current and Future Risk Profiles for Field Crops (RCP8.5)

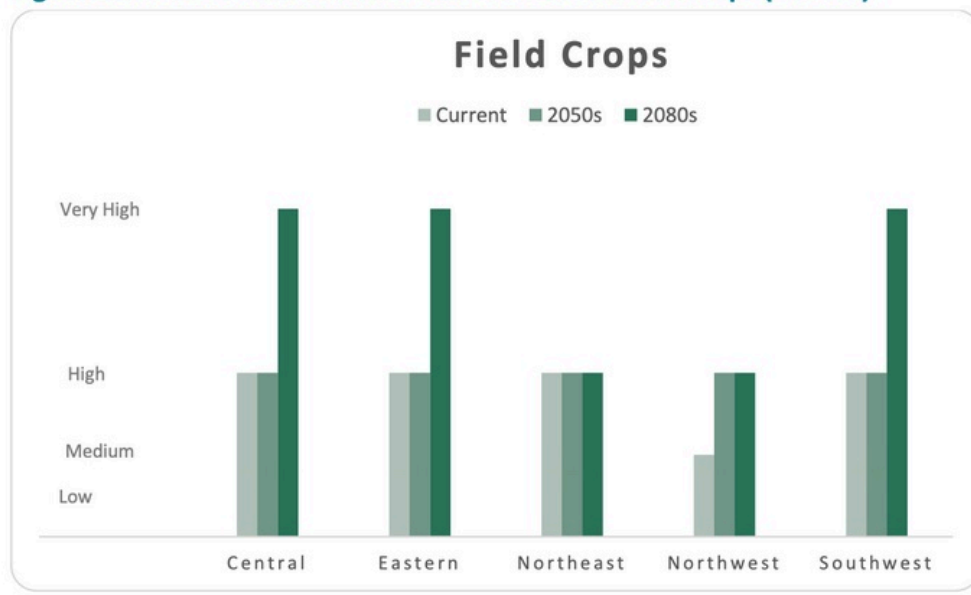
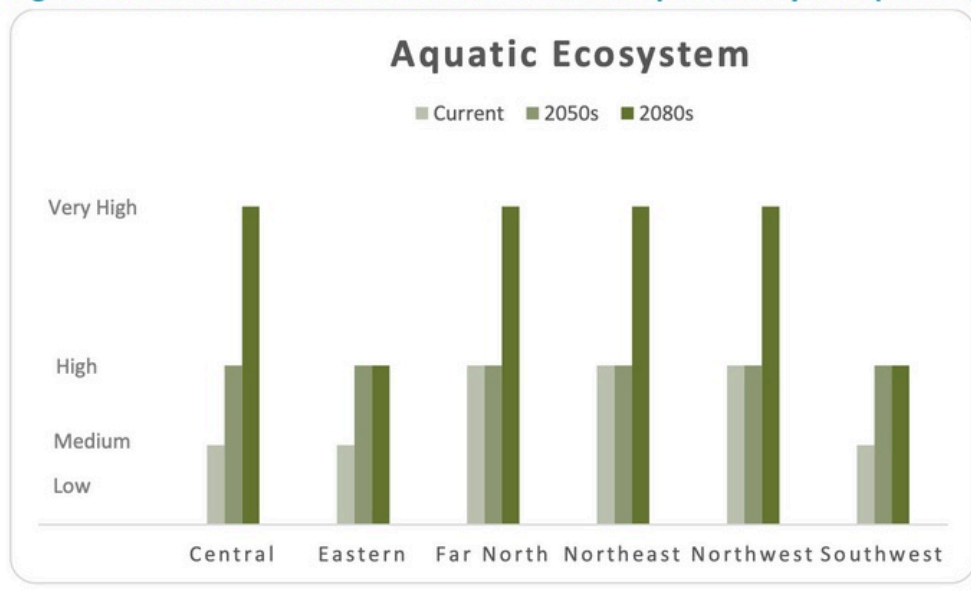


Figure 13.12: Current and Future Risk Profiles for Aquatic Ecosystem (RCP8.5)



Appendix 4: Land Supply Isn't the Issue

Ontario doesn't need to open the Greenbelt to meet housing needs. The province's own planning experts and independent analysts all show the same thing: there is already far more land available than required.

- **Figure 1** shows that in 2023, Ontario's regional and single-tier planning leaders confirmed there are already over one million approved but unbuilt housing units in municipalities covering 70% of the province's population. They also stated clearly that removing land from the Greenbelt is not necessary.
- **Figure 2** highlights the findings of Kevin Eby, former Director of Community Planning for Waterloo Region, who reviewed data from 21 municipalities across the Greater Golden Horseshoe. He found that municipalities had already zoned land for over two million homes — exceeding the province's 1.5 million target for all of Ontario.
- **Figure 3** comes from Environmental Defence's Big Sprawl report, which shows that municipalities have already designated four times the land needed to meet 2051 growth targets, proving that sprawl, not land supply, is the real issue.

The exact numbers differ depending on whether you count approved but unbuilt units, zoned land, or designated growth areas, but all the evidence points in the same direction. Ontario already has far more housing land than it needs. The Greenbelt is not a barrier to housing — it's a scapegoat.

Total Housing Supply	Unit Type				
	Single-detached	Semi-detached	Townhouse	Apartment	All Types
Registered Unbuilt	19,891	904	16,214	25,371	62,379
Draft Approved	51,124	6,059	55,095	156,976	269,253
Under Application / Proposed	50,977	4,138	68,240	607,775	731,129
Ministerial Zoning Order	148	-	1,326	62,725	64,199
Total	122,139	11,101	140,875	852,846	1,126,960
<i>% Share of Total</i>	<i>10.8%</i>	<i>1.0%</i>	<i>12.5%</i>	<i>75.7%</i>	<i>100%</i>

Figure1: Regional and Single Tier Planning Leaders of Ontario (formerly the Regional Planning Commissioners of Ontario). 2023. <https://pub-peelregion.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=27719>

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Appendix 4 Continued: Land Supply Isn't the Issue

Existing Capacity for New Housing Units Identified in GGH Upper- and Single-Tier Municipal Land Needs Assessment			
Municipality	Minimum Existing Built Up Area Capacity (units)	Existing Designated Growth Area/Rural Area Capacity (units)	Total
Inner Ring (includes 6 Greater Toronto Area Municipalities)	989,220	392,368	1,381,588
Outer Ring (includes 15 municipalities bounded by Waterloo Region, Simcoe County, Northumberland County and Niagara Region)	375,370	311,479	686,849
Greater Golden Horseshoe Total	1,364,590	703,847	2,068,437

Figure 2: Kevin Eby for the Alliance for a Liveable Ontario. 2023.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1i4-mtfRHFbkQQW1bCorpmc2wCijamztQ/view>

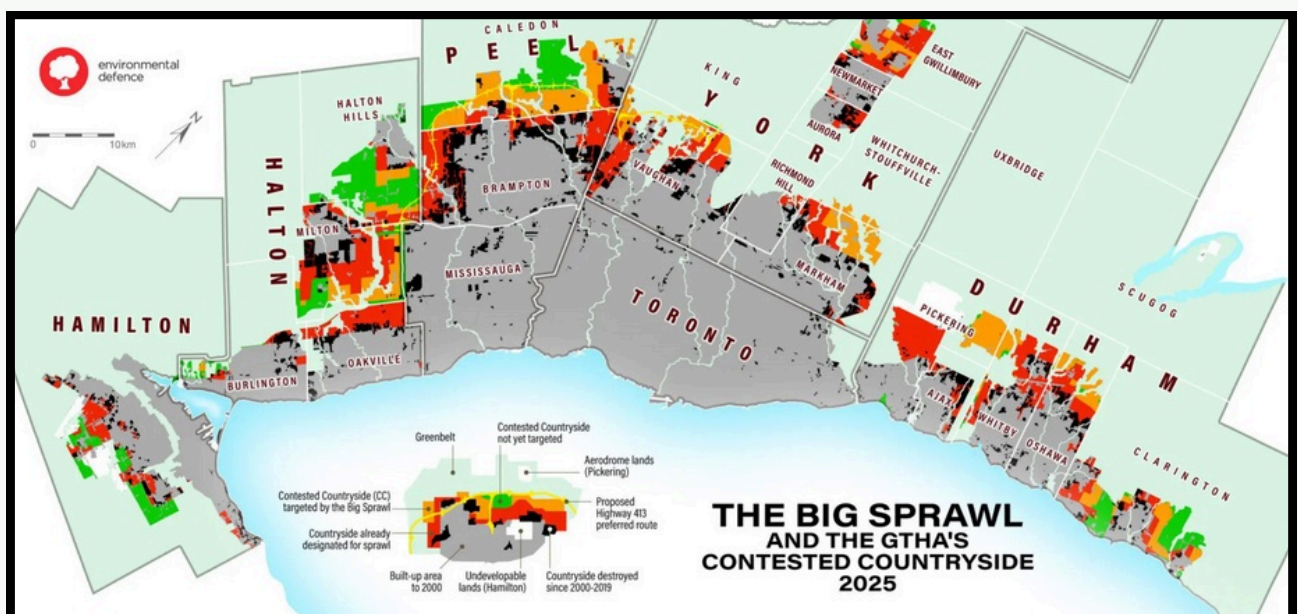


Figure 3: Environmental Defence Canada <https://environmentaldefence.ca/the-big-sprawl/>

Across every measure, from approved units to zoned land to designated growth areas, Ontario already has more than enough land for housing to meet its growth targets to 2051. The Greenbelt is not the problem.