

Commentary ? OFA tracking Greenbelt expansion

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Expanding Ontario's Greenbelt by one million acres attracted a lot of attention when the idea was proposed by a group of municipal leaders this past June.

The announcement was made by the Municipal Leaders for the Greenbelt in the lead up to the fall municipal election, and is widely expected to become an election issue.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) position on farmland preservation has not changed. We will be watching this proposed Greenbelt expansion very closely. And we're consulting with government policymakers and regional federations that would be affected by this proposal.

Ontario's Greenbelt is the largest permanently protected land base of its kind, spanning more than 1.8 million acres of forest, farmlands and wetlands. The proposal by the Municipal Leaders for the Greenbelt includes three key components ? the one million acre expansion, the creation of a new food belt and the reduction in red tape required to grow the Greenbelt.

The creation of a 200,000 acre food belt is designed to encourage greater food production in areas adjacent to Ontario's largest urban centres. This area would run between urban areas in Toronto, Brampton and Mississauga, and the existing Greenbelt.

The third element of the proposal by the Greenbelt group includes reducing red tape for municipalities wanting to grow, or join Greenbelted areas.

It's been almost 10 years since the Ontario government established a provincial Greenbelt, adding one million acres to the already protected Niagara Escarpment and Oak Ridges Moraine. And with the 10-year review slated for 2015, OFA is focussed on making sure the review properly assesses the impact of designating protection to these areas. OFA has consulted with regional federations within the current Greenbelt and those surrounding the area to evaluate the Greenbelt itself, and the six expansion requirements to extend the protected area. For OFA, one thing is very clear ? that no expansion of the Greenbelt can take place until a comprehensive review is complete.

Fundamentally, the Greenbelt concept is to protect farmland, but it comes with limits and restrictions that must be carefully evaluated before considering further expansion. Farmers have already identified areas for improvement. OFA will make sure we have a voice and a means to influence the 2015 review process and the actual review.