

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agricultural land preservation in Ontario is primarily accomplished by one of two policy-led approaches: the Greenbelt Plan in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, and the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) throughout the remainder of the province. Both of these policies are implemented at the municipal level through local plans, resulting in an approach that is indirect and decentralized. Under the PPS, agricultural policies are included as part of the general land use legislation, and in this way represent a low level of provincial involvement in farmland preservation. The Greenbelt Plan is established through legislation specific to the protection of rural and agricultural lands, but its reliance on the municipality to implement the Plan means that for the purposes of comparison, it represents a “medium” level of provincial involvement.

In contrast, British Columbia has taken on a high level of provincial involvement in farmland preservation through the creation of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), a province-wide agricultural zone managed by the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC). This approach to farmland preservation is direct and centralized; the legislation is specific to agricultural preservation and the ALC is a separate administrative structure, an administrative tribunal that implements the legislation directly.

These three policy approaches are compared using a policy analysis designed to reveal the salient facts about the policies and their governance in order to assess them with reference to each other and a survey of the literature. After examining the differences between these three policy approaches and the perceived effectiveness of each approach, this report emerges with a set of recommendations for agricultural land management in Ontario.

The policy analysis, along with a survey of existing literature, reveals the following key findings:

- Relative to British Columbia, the Province of Ontario demonstrates a low level of involvement in the preservation of agricultural land;
- The ALC's longevity provides a permanence that is beneficial to long-term agricultural planning, while Ontario has yet to establish a permanent, province-wide legislative presence in agricultural preservation;
- With regard to farmland preservation, the ALC has articulated its objectives more clearly than either of the Ontario policies;
- The ALC identifies, preserves, and tracks changes to all prime agricultural land in the province; Ontario has multiple jurisdictions responsible for farmland preservation and does not inventory or track changes to its agricultural land base;
- The ALR is based on CLI data, while Ontario has created the option for municipalities to identify lands through an alternative land evaluation system such as LEAR;
- The ALC Act is agriculture-specific and supersedes all other planning instruments, while the Ontario legislation is generally not agriculture-specific and does not supersede other provincial planning legislation;
- The ALC is a centralized, autonomous authority with regional representation; Ontario is well-represented locally, but does not have a central authority to ensure the consistent implementation of agricultural policies;
- The ALC has a wide range of responsibilities including monitoring, but of the three managing authorities, none seems to adequately monitor its policy performance or consistently act in a proactive capacity;
- The ALC and ALR represent a well-coordinated institutional approach to policy formation and implementation that are more likely to withstand development pressure; Ontario's indirect method of implementation leaves room for inconsistency and is less likely to withstand development pressures;
- Exclusions of land from and severances within agricultural areas are possible in all three policies, but are more common in Ontario than in BC;
- All three agricultural land preservation policies are supported by a number of other policies, but are lacking a fully comprehensive approach to support the agricultural industry;
- The ALR has high potential for success in preserving agricultural land; the PPS has low potential; and the Greenbelt Plan has "medium" potential.

These findings inform the following recommendations for agricultural land preservation policy to be considered by the Province of Ontario:

1. The Province should make an attempt to raise the public profile of agricultural land preservation through greater overall provincial involvement;
2. Provincial agricultural policy should clearly articulate its objectives regarding the preservation of agricultural land and should convey an impression of permanence;
3. The Province should undertake an initiative to create a consolidated inventory and accurately track the loss of prime agricultural lands throughout the province;
4. The Province should consider the province-wide implementation of a tiered policy framework for agricultural land evaluation based on a comprehensive and progressively more rigorous evaluation including detailed municipal evaluations;
5. The Province should consider the creation of provincial legislation aimed specifically at the long-term preservation and management of the agricultural land base;
6. The provincial agricultural management structure should consist of a centralized, autonomous authority with local representation;
7. The provincial agricultural management authority should continuously monitor the implementation of its policies and take on a proactive role in strategic planning and outreach;
8. The Province should consider the creation of an exclusive provincial agricultural zone;
9. The Province should consider further restricting the ability of municipalities to exclude land from agricultural areas, and should provide statutory criteria to assist committees of adjustment in their decisions regarding lot creation by consent. With regard to agricultural lands, these functions should be fulfilled by a provincial agricultural commission;
10. In recognition that the success of a farmland preservation policy is directly related to the viability of the agricultural industry, the Province should endeavor to create a fully comprehensive system of policies supportive of agriculture and restrictive of urban growth.

In general, these recommendations advocate a more direct and centralized approach to agricultural land preservation in Ontario, similar to that of British Columbia. However, these recommendations also account for some of the weaknesses of the BC approach and attempt to build on some of the existing strengths of the policies currently in place in Ontario. The implementation of these recommendations would result in greater provincial involvement in the management of its agricultural resource, while maintaining flexibility for regional responsiveness. While this report is focused

specifically on agricultural land use policy, it is acknowledged that protecting the viability of the agricultural industry is a much more complex problem that requires a comprehensive strategy including a multifaceted support system for the farming community.