

New Rouge National Urban Park Offers Unprecedented Opportunity to Support GTA Farming & Local Food

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Guelph – Could local food and sustainable near-urban agriculture be part of the new Rouge National Urban Park?

Friday's \$143.7 million announcement by federal Minister of the Environment, Peter Kent, and Finance Minister Jim Flaherty solidifies the Canadian government's commitment to establishing the country's first urban national park, and paves the way for the creation of an entirely new national park model that supports farming activities and food production in addition to celebrating natural and cultural heritage.

"The new Rouge National Urban Park offers one of the most innovative opportunities for the protection of farmland resources, agricultural heritage and local food production in our generation," says Stew Hilts, Chair of the Ontario Farmland Trust, a non-profit organization that promotes farmland preservation.

Hilts says the location, within 100 kilometers of 20 percent of Canada's population, opens up immense opportunity to connect people to agriculture and the land that grows the food we eat.

The new park will also include some of some of Canada's (and the GTA's) best Class 1-3 farmlands. At Friday's announcement, the park study area was released, outlining an additional 5,000 acres of prime agricultural lands in York Region to be added to the current Rouge Park.

"We are very excited to see the York lands added to the new national park, to see agriculture included as an integral part of the park, and prime farmlands protected for their highest and best use for continued farming," Hilts says. Farmland loss in Southern Ontario is a serious concern, he says, with over 2 million acres of this unique farmland resource lost in the past 30 years. Nowhere is this loss more apparent than in the GTA.

The York Region lands are part of an 18,600 acre reserve the federal government has held since the 1970s for a potential airport development. Federal lands remaining outside the National Park study area are located in Durham Region and are managed by Transport Canada. Matt Setzkorn, Ontario Farmland Trust Policy Coordinator, says more could be done to bring resolution to land use and management of all federal lands in the GTA East area, including the Durham lands.

"We hope the federal government will use the Rouge National Urban Park planning process to also provide some clarity to its intentions for future land use and management of the federal airport lands in Durham," Setzkorn says.

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Much of this land is surplus to what may be needed for a future airport, he says, and additional planning should be done to support farming and conservation on Durham lands, as is being done within the Rouge National Urban Park boundaries. Parks Canada, for example, is investigating the use of long-term farm leases on York Region lands, which will give farmers security in land and encourage them to invest in long-term stewardship, compared to current month-to-month leases offered by Transport Canada.

“Ultimately, we’re talking about improving land stewardship and demonstrating leadership in creation of this new National Urban Park model, centred on collaboration and mutual interest in sustaining food production and our natural and cultural heritage, from soil biodiversity to wildlife habitat in hedgerows along farm fields,” Hilts says.

Protecting and managing our prime farmland for long-term food production is key for the health and sustainability of any region, he says, while at the same time preserving and restoring wetlands, forests and grasslands in areas that cannot support farming.

Since spring 2011, when the Government of Canada first declared interest in creating Canada's first national urban park in the Rouge Valley east of Toronto, Parks Canada has been working with over 100 national, provincial and regional organizations with expertise in conservation, farming, tourism, recreation, youth, engagement and education to develop a Rouge National Park concept. The initial park concept will be released to the public for feedback and input at the end of June.

“We commend the federal government’s commitment to creating Canada’s first near-urban national park that includes a working farm landscape,” Setzkorn says. “With continued leadership, vision and collaboration between governments and community stakeholders we can work to permanently protect these lands for agriculture and natural heritage. We look forward to ongoing dialogue with Parks Canada and other partners to further develop the park concept and help this exciting initiative take root.”

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Ontario Farmland Trust – Protecting Farmland for Farmers

The Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT) is a non-for-profit organization, established in 2004, that works to protect and preserve farmland and associated agricultural, natural and cultural features of the Ontario’s countryside. OFT conducts research and education activities to further the preservation of these lands for the benefit of current and future generations. OFT also protects farmland by working directly with landowners who want to permanently protect their farm properties for farming.