

Integrated Systems Approaches to Farmland and Natural Heritage Features Protection: A Provincial Perspective

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The Context and the Issue

- Focusing today on the Greenbelt Plan, 2017 as an example of finding balance between protection of the agricultural system and the natural heritage system at a provincial level.
- The Greenbelt Plan, 2017 recognizes the importance of both systems to the Greater Golden Horseshoe. The two **overlapping systems** are **mutually supportive**. The protection of these resources is vitally important to the long term vision for the Greater Golden Horseshoe.
- When observed on the landscape of the countryside – they are not separate entities, but an inter-connected dynamic system sharing the same geography.
 - NHS extends into agricultural land through buffers and connecting linkages
 - AgS extends into natural heritage features and settlement areas through agricultural activities and processing.

The Context and the Issue

- In theory, land use planning for these systems in an integrated manner makes sense, recognizing their relationship on the landscape, but in practice, it has been more challenging to bring to fruition.
- As part of the coordinated review of provincial plans, a concerted effort was made by the Province to listen to stakeholders and provide more clarity with respect to an integrated approach to planning for the two systems, and a number of small but important amendments were made to the Greenbelt Plan, 2017
- Many of these examples, framed as a series of questions that agricultural producers or municipal planners often ask, are drawn from an Info Sheet developed by staff in OMAFRA in conjunction with MNRF and MMAH. It is posted on the OMAFRA website in the material related to Agricultural Systems.
 - <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/landuse/agsys-sum.htm>

Can the agricultural system and the natural heritage system overlap on my property?

- Much as it does on the actual landscape, parts of the natural heritage systems of the Greenbelt Plan do overlap with areas of the agricultural system. The policies of the Greenbelt Plan recognize the importance of both the natural heritage systems and agricultural system.
- Where the systems overlap, a property is subject to the policies of both systems.
- The Greenbelt Plan policies provide flexibility for agricultural uses within the natural Heritage system.
- Lands within the agricultural system should be designated in municipal official plans. The natural heritage system should be shown as an overlay or dual designation.



Do the policies of the Greenbelt Plan allow me to continue to farm in and adjacent to key natural heritage features and key hydrologic features?

- Lands that are being used for agriculture can continue to be used for agricultural purposes and changes in agricultural activities are allowed without a land use planning application.
 - For example, lands in row crop production could be converted to pasture, or planted as an orchard.
 - Improvements to farmland, such as stone removal, tile draining a field or fencing a pasture could also occur.
- Some agricultural activities that would not be considered development or site alteration can also occur within *key natural heritage features*.
 - For example, maple tree taps and sap collection lines
- While not subject to an application under the *Planning Act*, some of these agricultural activities may be subject to municipal by-laws (e.g. tree-cutting) or regulatory controls under the *Conservation Authorities Act*.

Can I establish an agricultural use or build a new agricultural building in the Natural Heritage System?

- A full range of existing and new agricultural uses, agriculture-related uses, on-farm diversified uses, and normal farm practices are permitted in the Natural Heritage System (Greenbelt Plan 3.2.2.1).
- New agricultural buildings are allowed within the Natural Heritage System subject to other policies such as those regarding key natural heritage features (Greenbelt Plan 3.2.2.2). (See next slide).



Can I build new agricultural buildings or structures in or adjacent to a key natural heritage feature or a key hydrologic feature?

- New buildings permitted within 120 metres of key natural heritage features or key hydrologic features without the need for a natural heritage or hydrologic evaluation subject to the following requirements:
 - A minimum 30 metre vegetation protection zone is provided from key features.
 - The land is, and will continue to be used for agricultural purposes. If the land is not being used for agricultural purposes, a condition of natural self-sustaining vegetation is required for the vegetation protection zone.
 - Best management practices will be pursued by the agricultural operator to protect and restore key features and their functions (Greenbelt Plan 3.2.5.7)

Can I expand an existing agricultural building or structure that is already located within a key natural heritage feature?

- Expansion of existing buildings addressed by the existing uses provisions of the Greenbelt Plan (Greenbelt Plan 4.5.5) and permitted if demonstrated that the following criteria are met:
 - There is no alternative and expansion or alteration in the feature is minimized.
 - If in the vegetation protection zone, the expansion or alteration is directed away from the feature to the maximum extent possible.
 - The impact of the expansion or alteration on the feature and its functions is minimized and mitigated to the maximum extent possible



Are agricultural activities permitted in the vegetation protection zone surrounding natural heritage features?

- If the land is and will continue to be used for agricultural purposes, all agricultural activities are allowed, and the *vegetation protection zone* does not need to consist of *natural self-sustaining vegetation*. The type of agricultural activity within the *vegetation protection zone* can be changed without a land use planning approval, providing it doesn't involve the construction of a new building or structure (Greenbelt Plan 3.2.5.7).
- Examples of agricultural activity include:
 - growing crops
 - raising and pasturing livestock
 - maintaining existing buildings and structures
 - maintaining buffers, and
 - mowing grassed areas.



Are there special considerations for agricultural buildings in the Niagara Peninsula Specialty Crop Area?

- In addition to the policies described previously, in the Niagara Specialty Crop Area, new buildings or structures for agriculture are permitted within 30 metres of permanent and intermittent streams subject to these conditions:
 - The permanent or intermittent stream also functions as an agricultural swale, roadside ditch or municipal drain as shown on provincially approved mapping.
 - A minimum 15 metre vegetation protection zone is established between the building and the permanent or intermittent stream.
 - There is no alternative location for the building or structure without impacting lands that are in specialty crop production.
 - New individual on-site sewage systems will not be located within 30 metres of the stream.
 - Requirements for vegetation protection zone and best management practices apply as well, similar to 30 metre setback provisions. (Greenbelt Plan 3.2.5.8).

