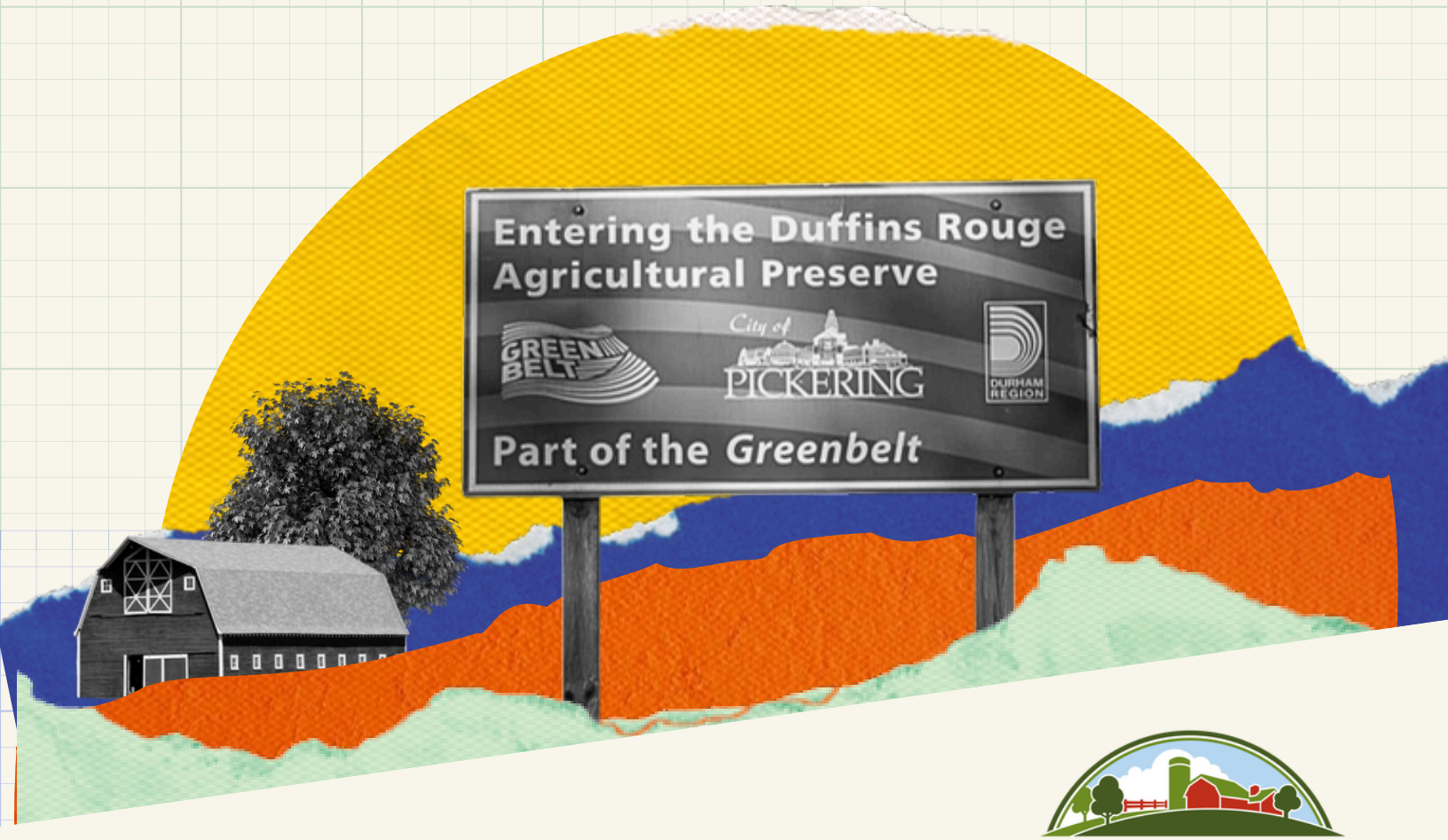
ONTARIO FARMLAND TRUST

AUGUST 2026

Future Vision for the DRAP

REPORT



ONTARIO FARMLAND TRUST
PROTECTING FARMLAND FOREVER

At a critical moment in the history of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP), this report sets out a practical vision for a permanently protected, actively farmed, economically viable, and resilient agricultural future.

GREEN BELT

Possibility grows here.

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Acronyms

AAFC	Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
AIA	Agricultural Impact Assessment
BMP	Beneficial Management Practice
CALMI	Cherrywood Area Lands Management Inc.
AIA	Agricultural Impact Assessment
CLI	Canada Land Inventory
CSA	Community-Supported Agriculture
DRAP	Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve
ERO	Environmental Registry of Ontario
FIELD Network	Farm Incubator and Education Learning Network
GIS	Geographic Information System
GTA	Greater Toronto Area
OFA	Ontario Federation of Agriculture
OFT	Ontario Farmland Trust
PSLUP	Provincial Secondary Land Use Program
PPS	Provincial Planning Statement
QR	Quick Response code
RNUP	Rouge National Urban Park

Key Terms Used in This Report

Agricultural or Conservation Easement

Agricultural or conservation easement is a legal agreement that is registered on title of a property that contains conditions and land use restrictions that protect specific conservation values on a property, including for agricultural uses. In the DRAP, easements have been applied as a key property-specific protection tool intended to preserve the agricultural capability, character, potential, and use of the lands.

Agricultural Impact Assessment

Agricultural impact assessment is defined in the PPS (2024) and means the evaluation of potential impacts of nonagricultural uses on the agricultural system. An assessment recommends ways to avoid or if avoidance is not possible, minimize and mitigate adverse impacts.

Agricultural System

Agricultural System is defined in the PPS (2024) and means a system comprised of a group of inter-connected elements that collectively create a viable, thriving agri-food sector. It has two components:

a) An agricultural land base comprised of prime agricultural areas, including specialty crop areas. It may also include rural lands that help to create a continuous productive land base for agriculture; and

b) An agri-food network which includes agricultural operations, infrastructure, services, and assets important to the viability of the agri-food sector.

Agricultural Land Base

The agricultural land base refers to the lands that support agricultural production, including prime agricultural areas, specialty crop areas, and other rural lands that form part of a continuous productive land base.

Agricultural Uses

Agricultural uses is defined in the PPS (2024) and means the growing of crops, including nursery, biomass, and horticultural crops; raising of livestock; raising of other animals for food, fur or fibre, including poultry and fish; aquaculture; apiaries; agro-forestry; maple syrup production; and associated on-farm buildings and structures, including, but not limited to livestock facilities, manure storages, value-retaining facilities, and housing for farm workers, when the size and nature of the operation requires additional employment.

Agriculture-Related Uses

Agriculture-related uses is defined in the PPS (2024) and means those farm related commercial and farm-related industrial uses that are directly related to farm operations in the area, support agriculture, benefit from being in close proximity to farm operations, and provide direct products and/or services to farm operations as a primary activity.

Agri-Food Network

Agri-food network is defined in the PPS (2024) as being within the agricultural system, a network that includes elements important to the viability of the agri-food sector such as regional infrastructure and transportation networks; agricultural operations including on-farm buildings and primary processing; infrastructure; agricultural services, farm markets, and distributors; and vibrant, agriculture-supportive communities.

Easement Holder

An easement holder is the organization or public body that is named on title and holds interest in a property through a conservation easement, and is responsible for monitoring, and enforcing the terms and conditions of the easement to ensure a property's conservation values are protected.

Prime Agricultural Area

Prime agricultural area is defined in the PPS (2024) and means areas where prime agricultural lands predominate. This includes areas of prime agricultural lands and associated Canada Land Inventory Class 4 through 7 lands, and additional areas with a local concentration of farms which exhibit characteristics of ongoing agriculture. Prime agricultural areas may be identified by a planning authority based on provincial guidance or informed by mapping obtained from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness and the Ontario Ministry of Rural Affairs or any successor to those ministries.

Prime Agricultural Land

Prime agricultural land is defined in the PPS (2024) and means specialty crop areas and/or Canada Land Inventory Class 1, 2, and 3 lands, as amended from time to time, in this order of priority for protection.

Regional Food System

For the purposes of this report, Durham's Regional Food System is defined using the Durham Food Policy Council's description found within the Food System Report Card, which includes the production, processing, distribution, access, consumption, and management of food, as well as the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and governance relationships that shape how food is produced, accessed, and understood.

Land Acknowledgement

The Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT) acknowledges that the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve is located in Pickering, within Durham Region, on lands and waters within the Treaty and traditional territory of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation and the Williams Treaties signatories of the Mississauga and Chippewa Nations.

This report is concerned with the long-term future of land, water, agriculture, stewardship, and community relationships. In that context, OFT recognizes that farmland protection and land stewardship take place within a much longer history of Indigenous relationships with these lands and waters, as well as the ongoing responsibilities created by treaty relationships. We acknowledge the knowledge, rights, responsibilities, and continuing presence of Indigenous Peoples, and recognize that future implementation of this vision should create opportunities for respectful learning, relationship-building, and engagement where land, water, stewardship, food systems, or public education initiatives may be affected.



Acknowledgements

The Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT) gratefully acknowledges the Greenbelt Foundation for its financial support of this project. The Foundation's investment made it possible to undertake the research, engagement, analysis, and report development needed to advance a practical vision for the agricultural future of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP).

The Greenbelt Foundation is a charitable organization dedicated to ensuring that Ontario's Greenbelt remains permanent, protected, and prosperous. Through investments in the Greenbelt's interconnected natural, agricultural, and economic systems, the Foundation supports a working and thriving Greenbelt that provides clean air, fresh water, local food, climate resilience, and lasting benefits to communities across the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

OFT also acknowledges the farmers, landowners, residents, agricultural organizations, conservation partners, municipal and regional representatives, and community members who contributed their time, knowledge, and perspectives to this project. Their input helped ground this vision in the practical realities of farming, land stewardship, community connection, and long-term farmland protection.

OFT extends particular thanks to those farming within and around the DRAP. Their continued stewardship, knowledge of the land, and commitment to agricultural production are central to the future of the DRAP.

This report reflects OFT's ongoing commitment to protecting and preserving Ontario's farmlands and associated agricultural, natural, and cultural landscapes for current and future generations.



Photo by OFT

About This Project / About the Authors

This report was prepared by the Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT), with funding provided by the Greenbelt Foundation.

The purpose of this project is to develop a practical and forward-looking vision for the agricultural future of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP). The report draws on research, policy review, agricultural land use planning, Agricultural Systems knowledge, and input from those connected to DRAP to identify strategic directions that can support a resilient, productive, and permanently protected agricultural landscape within Ontario's Greenbelt, while recognizing its broader importance to ecological connectivity, watershed health, and community identity.

This work was initiated to better understand the current conditions affecting agriculture in DRAP and to identify opportunities, policy directions and strategic actions that could contribute to its long-term success. While DRAP is currently protected for agriculture, its future as a strong and viable agricultural area depends on more than protection alone. It also depends on the conditions that allow farmers to invest in their operations, adapt to changing agricultural and economic realities, and maintain productive farm businesses within a complex ownership, leasing, and land use context.

For the purposes of this report, the "DRAP community" refers to those with a direct relationship to, or interest in, the future of the DRAP. This includes farmers who own or rent land within DRAP, landowners, residents living within and near the DRAP, agricultural organizations, municipal and regional representatives, conservation and environmental stakeholders, and members of the broader Pickering and Durham Region community who are affected by or connected to the long-term future of this landscape. Given DRAP's provincial significance as part of the Greenbelt and as one of Ontario's most prominent protected agricultural landscapes[1], this work also considers the broader public interest in farmland protection, food security, ecological connectivity, and responsible growth management.

The development of this vision has been informed by research, policy review, agricultural analysis, and extensive engagement with the DRAP community and agricultural stakeholders. Engagement activities included direct outreach to residents across the DRAP, a public survey conducted in summer 2025, a community workshop held in September 2025, one-on-one discussions with farmers and agricultural stakeholders who own, rent, or actively farm land within DRAP and the surrounding agricultural landscape as well as continuous open communication via email. These efforts were intended to better understand both the lived experience of those connected to the land and the practical conditions shaping the future of agriculture in the DRAP

Input was also received from Cherrywood Area Lands Management Inc. (CALMI), which provided correspondence and supporting materials to the OFT on behalf of landowners whose holdings comprise a significant proportion of the land within the DRAP. CALMI's correspondence and supporting materials were reviewed as part of this project and helped inform the report's understanding of landowner perspectives, current ownership dynamics, agricultural capability debates, and the challenges associated with implementing a long-term vision in a complex, privately owned landscape. While not all stakeholders share the same desired future for DRAP, their input is important to understanding the conditions, constraints, and competing interests that any credible vision must address.

This report is therefore not simply a statement of aspiration. It seeks to translate what was heard through engagement into recommendations that are grounded in DRAP's agricultural, ecological, ownership, and policy context. In some cases, community aspirations have been interpreted through the lens of what is realistically achievable under current conditions, including existing ownership patterns, lease arrangements, farm business realities, infrastructure limitations, and the need to respect farmers' decision-making. The intent is not to prescribe what farmers should grow or how individual farm businesses should operate, but to identify the conditions, partnerships, and policy changes that could better support long-term investment, agricultural viability, land stewardship, and community connection.

The project was led by Mitch Morawetz, Principal at Planfarm Inc., with strategic oversight and guidance by Martin Straathof, Executive Director at OFT. Supporting this work was Dean Orr of the OFT and graduate student in the Rural Planning and Development program at the University of Guelph.

The report reflects the combined expertise of land use planning, farmland conservation, Agricultural Systems research, and community engagement. It is intended to support the long-term viability of DRAP as a vibrant, permanently protected agricultural area by identifying practical policy, planning, stewardship, and partnership opportunities that can strengthen active farming, improve agricultural resilience, and ensure that, within the Greenbelt, the DRAP remains a productive, resilient, and permanently protected agricultural landscape for generations to come.

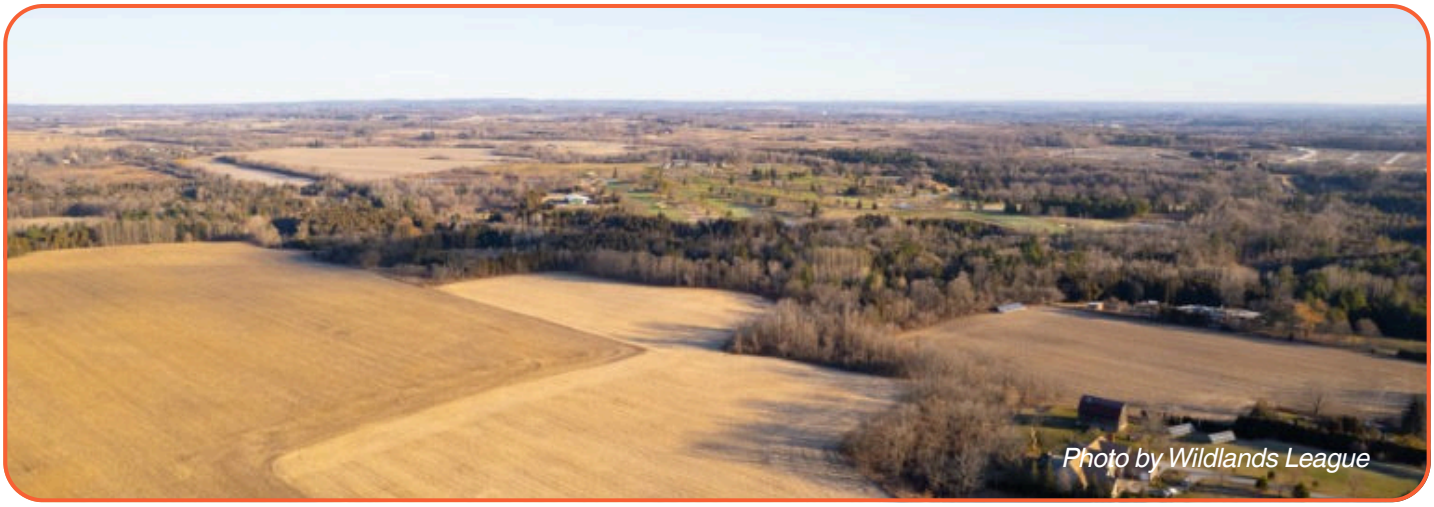


Photo by Wildlands League

Executive Summary



The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP) is one of Ontario's most significant protected agricultural landscapes. Located in the City of Pickering within Durham Region, the DRAP covers approximately 4,700 acres within Ontario's Greenbelt, contains high-quality agricultural land, and continues to support active farming today[2].

This report establishes a practical and forward-looking vision for the agricultural future of the DRAP. Prepared by the Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT) with funding from the Greenbelt Foundation, it draws on research, policy review, agricultural land use planning, community engagement, farmer and agricultural stakeholder input, resident outreach, survey feedback, and landowner correspondence. Its purpose is to identify the conditions, partnerships, policy directions, and implementation actions needed to support the DRAP as a permanently protected, actively farmed, economically viable, and resilient agricultural area.

The report responds to a critical moment in the DRAP's history. The repeal of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act and removal of the lands from the Greenbelt in 2022, followed by the reinstatement of protections in 2023, demonstrated that even highly protected agricultural lands can remain vulnerable to political and development pressure. These events reinforced the need for a clear vision that strengthens both permanent protection and practical agricultural viability. The central finding of this report is that permanent protection is essential, but protection alone is not sufficient.

The DRAP also has provincial and national significance because it forms part of a scarce high-capability agricultural land base within one of Canada's most heavily urbanized and growth-pressured regions. The long-term success of the DRAP will depend on whether the lands remain actively farmed, economically viable, well stewarded, publicly understood, and supported by the land use policy, infrastructure, ownership, tenure, and Agricultural System conditions needed for farming to thrive.

The vision for the DRAP is that it will be a permanently protected, highly productive, and economically viable agricultural area that sustains current farm operations, supports future generations of farmers, and demonstrates the long-term public value of protecting farmland within Ontario.

The DRAP remains a highly capable and productive agricultural land base. Current production is largely centred on field crops, particularly corn, soybeans, and wheat[3], which remain important components of Ontario's agri-food economy[4]. At the same time, agricultural diversity within the DRAP has narrowed over time. This reflects broader trends in Ontario agriculture, but also conditions specific to the DRAP, including farming on leased land, short-term tenure, development uncertainty, landowner interests, limited infrastructure investment, and the decline of nearby agricultural services[5].

Farmers are central to the future of the DRAP. Current farm operators bring the knowledge, equipment, labour, management skill, and stewardship required to keep the land productive. Much of the agricultural land in the DRAP is leased, and tenant farmers continue to manage the land carefully despite uncertainty. However, short-term access and non-aligned landowner interests can limit long-term investment in drainage, soil health, buildings, fencing, livestock infrastructure, perennial crops, direct-market enterprises, and other improvements that require a longer planning horizon.

Engagement undertaken through this project identified strong support for the long-term protection of the DRAP[6]. Residents and community members expressed concern about development pressure, farmland loss, and the need to uphold existing protections. Many also expressed interest in stronger public awareness, improved signage, local food access, farmgate sales, educational opportunities, ecological stewardship, and pathways for new and young farmers. These aspirations are important, but they must be interpreted through the realities of private ownership, existing farm operations, tenure arrangements, infrastructure constraints, and farmer decision-making.

The report's goals, vision pillars, strategic directions, and priority recommendations are organized around a practical premise: the DRAP should not only be protected from non-agricultural development, but supported as a functioning agricultural landscape. This requires action to strengthen and actively implement protection mechanisms; keep land actively farmed; improve land access, tenure security, and landowner alignment; support current farmers and future farmer pathways; enable farmer-led diversification where viable; strengthen the broader Agricultural System and agricultural support network; coordinate infrastructure and land use planning with agricultural needs; advance ecological stewardship in ways compatible with agriculture; improve public awareness and respect for the DRAP; and establish governance, accountability, funding, timelines, and monitoring.

Implementation will require shared responsibility. The Province, Durham Region, City of Pickering, landowners, farmers, agricultural organizations, conservation organizations, land trusts, community food partners, infrastructure agencies, and the surrounding community all have roles to play. A coordinated implementation body, such as a DRAP Agricultural Implementation Table or Stewardship Council, should be established to assign roles, identify funding, monitor progress, and address barriers over time.

Ultimately, the DRAP offers an opportunity to demonstrate how protected agricultural land can remain active, productive, and viable at the urban edge. Its future will depend on moving from uncertainty toward stability, and from protection on paper toward the practical conditions needed for agriculture to endure, adapt, and thrive for generations to come.

1. Introduction & Purpose

The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP) is one of Ontario's most important protected agricultural landscapes. Located in the City of Pickering within Durham Region, the DRAP covers approximately 4,700 acres within Ontario's Greenbelt Plan area and contains a significant concentration of high-quality agricultural land[7]. It has a long history of farming and continues to support active agricultural production today.



***Figure 1**: The DRAP within a broader regional context.*

The DRAP is also a landscape shaped by complexity and contestation. Its history includes major public land assembly, decades of uncertainty connected to the proposed Pickering Airport, the transfer of lands into private ownership subject to agricultural easements, and repeated debate about the long-term future of the lands[8]. More recently, the repeal of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act and removal of the lands from the Greenbelt Plan in 2022, followed by the reinstatement of protections in 2023, demonstrated both the vulnerability and resilience of the existing protection framework[9].

This report has been prepared to establish a practical and forward-looking vision for the agricultural future of the DRAP. Its purpose is to identify the conditions, policy directions, partnerships, and implementation actions needed to support the DRAP as a permanently protected, actively farmed, economically viable, and resilient agricultural area within Ontario's Greenbelt.

The central premise of this report is that permanent protection is essential, but protection alone is not sufficient. The DRAP's long-term success will depend not only on whether the lands remain protected from non-agricultural development, but also on whether they continue to function as a productive working agricultural landscape. This requires secure access to land, long-term tenure, landowner alignment, infrastructure that supports farming, viable farm businesses, ecological stewardship compatible with agriculture, and a strong Agricultural System.

The Provincial Planning Statement, 2024 (PPS) provides foundational direction for the Agricultural System in Ontario. Under the PPS, the Agricultural System includes both the agricultural land base and the agri-food network that supports agriculture. The agricultural land base includes the farmland itself, while the agri-food network includes the infrastructure, services, transportation routes, markets, processing, distribution, and agriculture-supportive communities that allow farming to function effectively[10].

For DRAP, this means its future cannot be understood only within the DRAP's boundaries; it must also be considered in relation to the broader network of lands, services, policies, and partnerships that support farming in and around the DRAP.

The Regional Food System is related to the Agricultural System, but is broader in scope. For the purposes of this report, Durham's Regional Food System includes the production, processing, distribution, access, consumption, and management of food, as well as the social, economic, environmental, cultural, and governance relationships that shape how food is produced, accessed, and understood. This includes agriculture, but also extends to food access, food literacy, community food security, local food infrastructure, public health, economic development, environmental sustainability, and community partnerships[11]. In this context, the DRAP is not a food system on its own; rather, it is a protected agricultural land base within Durham's broader Regional Food System and the Ontario agri-food economy.

The vision developed through this project is grounded in research, policy review, agricultural land use planning, engagement with residents and community members, conversations with farmers and agricultural stakeholders, and input from landowners and landowner representatives.



The engagement did not produce a single consensus view. Rather, it revealed a set of recurring themes: strong support for the long-term protection of the DRAP, concern about ongoing uncertainty, recognition of the land's agricultural value interest in stronger community connection and local food opportunities, and the need to address practical barriers affecting farming.

The intent of this report is not to prescribe what individual farmers should grow or how farm businesses should operate. Farmers must remain central to decisions about production, diversification, investment, and farm viability. Instead, this report focuses on the conditions that would allow current and future farmers to operate with greater confidence, invest over longer time horizons, and respond to changing economic, environmental, and community conditions where it is viable and appropriate to do so

The DRAP's future has implications beyond its boundaries. It is relevant to broader questions of farmland protection, near-urban agriculture, conservation easements, infrastructure planning, food system resilience, ecological connectivity, and public understanding of agricultural land as a finite and non-renewable resource.

The purpose of this vision is to reaffirm the permanent agricultural role of the DRAP and identify what is required for that protection to translate into long-term agricultural success. The report seeks to move the conversation from uncertainty toward stability, and from protection on paper toward a vibrant, productive, and well-supported agricultural future.


Photo by OFT

2. Vision for the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve

Drawing from the research, policy review, and engagement undertaken through this project, several recurring themes emerged: the need for permanent protection, active agricultural use, greater certainty for farmers, stronger landowner alignment, appropriate infrastructure, and coordinated implementation with government support. Together, these themes form the basis for the following vision for the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP).

Rooted in its agricultural history and strengthened by clear, enduring, and adaptable policy protections, the DRAP will function as a stable and resilient foundation for agriculture at the urban edge. Farming within the DRAP will be supported by long-term certainty, appropriate infrastructure, and a coordinated approach among farmers, landowners, public agencies, agricultural organizations, conservation partners, and the surrounding community. These conditions will enable farmers to plan, invest, adapt, and pursue viable farm business decisions with greater confidence.

In the decades ahead, the DRAP will be recognized not only for the quality of its soils, but for the strength of the Agricultural System it supports. A broader range of agricultural activities, agriculture-related uses, and on-farm diversified opportunities may emerge over time where they are viable, farmer-led, and compatible with the agricultural purpose of the lands. These opportunities can help strengthen farm viability, support succession and new farmer pathways, improve connections to Durham's broader food system, and reinforce the role of protected farmland in community well-being.

The DRAP will also serve as a visible and valued component of the surrounding community. Its proximity to growing urban areas should be leveraged to increase public understanding of agriculture, farmland protection, food production, and the history of the DRAP. Education and outreach should form a core part of the vision, including signage, public information materials, farm and food system education for the broader community, workshops, webinars, interpretive resources, and opportunities for residents to better understand how the DRAP fits within the Greenbelt, the Agricultural System, the Rouge-Duffins landscape, and Durham's Regional Food System

Through coordinated planning, investment, and stewardship, the DRAP will stand as a model for how protected agricultural lands can remain active, productive, and integrated within a rapidly changing region. Its future should demonstrate that farmland protection is not about preventing development; it's about recognizing farmland as a foundational resource for our local agri-food systems and ensuring that land use planning decisions support the conditions that allow agriculture, ecological stewardship, and community connection to endure together.

2.1. VISION STATEMENT

The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve will be a permanently protected, highly productive, well-stewarded and economically viable agricultural area that sustains current farm operations, supports future generations of farmers, and demonstrates the long-term public value of protection of farmland within Ontario.

2.2 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The following goals translate the vision for the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve into clear areas of long-term outcomes for the future of the Preserve. They are intended to provide the foundation for the Vision Pillars, Strategic Directions and Priority Recommendations, implementation responsibilities, and measures of success that follow in this report. Together, these goals reflect a central finding of this project: permanent protection is essential, but protection alone is not sufficient. The long-term success of the Preserve will depend on whether the lands remain actively farmed, economically viable, well stewarded, and supported by land use policy, infrastructure, ownership, tenure, and conditions of the Agricultural System needed for farming to thrive.



Photo by Land Over Landings

Goal 1: Maintain, strengthen, and actively implement permanent agricultural protection

The DRAP should remain permanently protected for agriculture through a durable and coordinated framework that includes provincial legislation and policy, municipal planning instruments, agricultural easements, and other legal, institutional, stewardship, and land-based tools. Protection should be understood not only as preventing non-agricultural development, but as creating the certainty, accountability, and implementation capacity needed for the DRAP to function as a permanently protected agricultural landscape.

Objectives:

- Maintain the DRAP as a protected agricultural landscape within Ontario's Greenbelt.
- Ensure the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act, Greenbelt Plan, Provincial Planning Statement, Envision Durham Official Plan, City of Pickering Official Plan, applicable zoning, and agricultural easements remain aligned in protecting the lands for agriculture.
- Ensure future policy reviews reinforce the agricultural role and long-term purpose of the DRAP.
- Ensure protection mechanisms are clear, enforceable, monitored, and aligned with long-term agricultural objectives.
- Establish clear accountability for upholding the agricultural purpose of the DRAP over time.
- Protect against fragmentation, conversion, incompatible land uses, infrastructure impacts, and gradual weakening of the agricultural land base.
- Ensure planning decisions consistently reinforce the permanent agricultural purpose of the lands.



Goal 2: Keep the DRAP actively farmed and agriculturally productive

The agricultural value of the DRAP depends on its continued use as a working agricultural landscape. The DRAP should be actively farmed, productive, and capable of supporting viable agricultural operations over the long term. This requires operating conditions that allow farmers to manage land sustainably, make appropriate investments, and adapt their farm businesses over time[12]. These conditions include support for current farmers, protection of existing viable farm operations, secure land access, functional drainage, adequate field entrances, healthy soil, farm infrastructure, equipment movement, and landowner cooperation.

Objectives:

- Maintain and, where appropriate, increase the amount of land in active agricultural use, while respecting natural heritage features and supporting the practical ability to farm the land.
- Support current farmers in continuing to operate efficiently and productively while implementation of the Vision allows the potential for greater economic viability.
- Maintain soil health, drainage, field access, farm entrances, farm infrastructure, and equipment movement needed for ongoing agricultural production.
- Avoid displacing, undermining, or unintentionally complicating existing viable farm operations.
- Recognize farmers as both agricultural producers and land stewards whose management decisions support the productivity, health, and resilience of the DRAP.
- Encourage landowners and public agencies to support the practical conditions required for active farming, including reasonable access, maintenance, permissions for agricultural improvements, and cooperation with farm operators.

Goal 3: Improve farmer access to land, tenure security, landowner alignment, and long-term investment conditions

A successful agricultural future for the DRAP depends on farmers having secure and reliable access to land. Much of the land within the DRAP is farmed through lease arrangements, and tenure security depends not only on lease length, but also on renewal expectations, landowner cooperation, permissions for agricultural improvements, and confidence that agriculture will remain the long-term priority for the land. This goal is not intended to prescribe ownership outcomes, require landowners to sell land, or suggest that existing lease arrangements are necessarily inadequate. Rather, it recognizes the realities of private ownership while seeking to improve the conditions that allow current and future farmers to plan, invest, and operate with confidence.

This goal also recognizes the importance of future farmer pathways. Opportunities for new and young farmers should be explored in ways that complement, rather than displace or undermine, existing viable farm operations. Over time, these opportunities may help align land tenure more closely with permanent agricultural use within the DRAP.

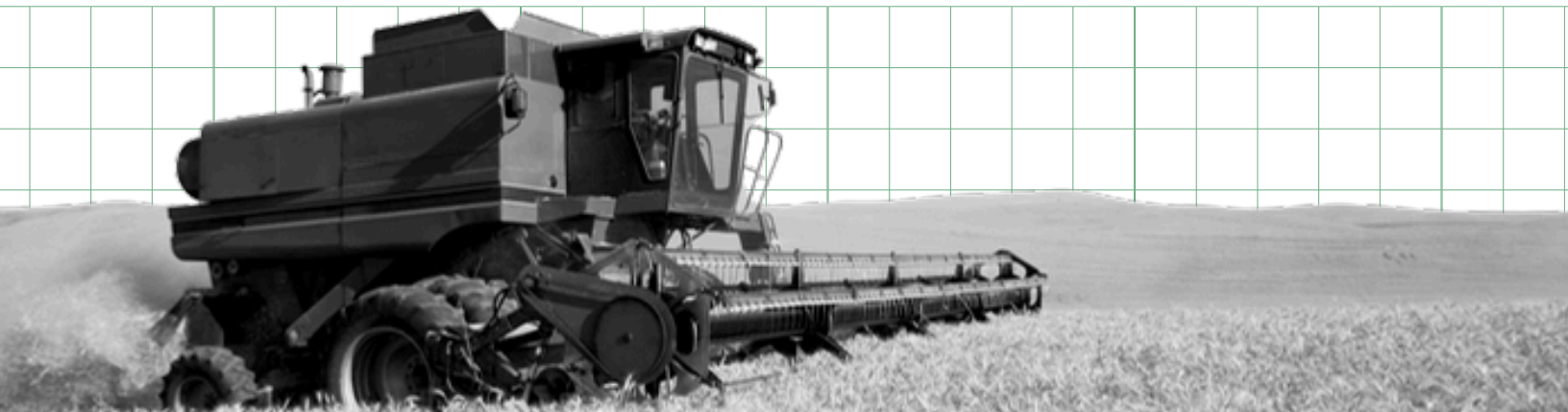
Objectives:

- Support secure and reliable agricultural land access for farmers operating within the DRAP.
- Encourage lease arrangements and renewal expectations that support farm business planning, land stewardship, and appropriate long-term investment.
- Encourage landowner cooperation and permissions for agricultural improvements that are consistent with the agricultural purpose of the DRAP.
- Improve pathways for new and young farmers to access land within the DRAP without displacing or undermining existing farm operations.
- Enable new opportunities for land access and succession that keep land in active agricultural use where landowners choose to participate.
- Protect confidentiality and working relationships for tenant farmers while still addressing the structural importance of land tenure, land access, and landowner decision-making.
- Explore complementary farmland access opportunities on smaller, irregular, edge, utility corridor, publicly controlled, or otherwise underutilized lands where appropriate and where this would not displace existing viable farm operations.

Goal 4: Strengthen farm viability in the DRAP's near-urban context

Farming within the DRAP occurs in a complex near-urban environment. Being located in the heart of the Greater Toronto Area creates opportunities for market access, public connection, agri-food entrepreneurship, and education. However, it also creates additional cost pressures, including higher land and operating costs, traffic constraints, trespassing, land use compatibility issues, infrastructure conflicts, fragmented access routes, and uncertainty created by surrounding urban growth. Maintaining or enhancing farm viability should therefore be prioritized in land use planning, infrastructure, economic development, and policy decisions affecting the DRAP.

At the same time, near-urban opportunities should be approached realistically. Not every farm operation will wish to pursue direct-market sales, agritourism, local food distribution, or public-facing activities. These opportunities should be supported where they are farmer-led, financially viable, compatible with the agricultural purpose of the DRAP, and not disruptive to existing farm operations. New agriculture-related uses are encouraged where they support primary agricultural production in the DRAP and other nearby agricultural lands.



Objectives:

- Address the cost, land use compatibility, and operational pressures associated with farming in a near-urban setting.
- Support farm business conditions that enable long-term investment, succession, adaptation, and operational efficiency.
- Ensure that planning, infrastructure, road design, and surrounding growth decisions are assessed for their impact on agricultural operations, including equipment movement, field access, drainage, construction timing, field configuration, and access to farm services.
- Reduce land use conflicts between agricultural operations and surrounding urban or rural residential uses through appropriate planning, buffering, public education, and respect for normal farm practices.
- Recognize agriculture as an economic activity and employment-generating land use within regional and municipal economic development and social planning.
- Recognize that viable agriculture requires both productive land and a supportive operating environment.

Goal 5: Enable farmer-led diversification and resilience within the Agricultural System

The DRAP should continue to support strong agricultural production while creating opportunities for greater diversity over time where conditions allow. Current production, including established crop rotations, remains important and should be respected. Field crop agriculture contributes significantly to Ontario's agri-food economy, even where those contributions are less visible to nearby residents than farm markets, livestock, fruit, vegetables, or direct-market agriculture.

At the same time, engagement through this project has identified interest in a broader range of agricultural activities, including direct-market production, fruit and vegetable crops, farm markets, community-supported agriculture, livestock-related opportunities, and other forms of local food production. This goal is not intended to prescribe what farmers should grow or how individual farm businesses should operate. Rather, it is intended to remove unnecessary barriers, identify suitable opportunities, and support a more resilient agricultural landscape that can respond to changing markets, climate conditions, community interests, and farmer aspirations.

Diversification should be understood within the broader Agricultural System. A farmer's ability to diversify depends not only on the willingness to do so and land capability, but also on tenure security, water access, drainage, farm infrastructure, labour, market access, processing, storage, distribution, transportation, landowner support, and clear planning permissions. Strengthening these conditions can create more options for farmers while maintaining respect for existing farm operations.

Objectives:

- Support continued for grain and oilseed farming and the production of hay and vegetable crops .
- Enable diversified agricultural activities where farmers choose to pursue them and where land, water, access, infrastructure, labour, tenure, landowner support, and market conditions make them feasible.
- Support complementary forms of agriculture in suitable locations without displacing or undermining existing viable farm operations.
- Strengthen local food production and direct-market opportunities where they are farmer-led, economically viable, and compatible with the purpose of the DRAP.

Goal 6: Clarify and strengthen the DRAP's role within Durham's Regional Food System

For the purposes of this report, the regional food system refers to the interconnected activities involved in producing, processing, distributing, accessing, consuming, and managing food within the broader region, together with the social, economic, and environmental relationships that support those activities. This includes agriculture, but also extends to food access, food literacy, community food security, local food infrastructure, public health, economic development, and environmental sustainability[13].

The DRAP's role within Durham's Regional Food System is primarily as a protected agricultural land base. Its most important contribution is the continued availability of high-quality farmland for active agricultural production. The DRAP's proximity to Pickering and the Greater Toronto Area should be understood not only as a source of pressure, but also as an opportunity. Where farmers are interested and conditions support it, the DRAP may also contribute to local food access, direct-market opportunities, education, and stronger relationships between farmers and nearby communities. These opportunities should complement, not replace, the broader agri-food economy that current production already supports.

Objectives:

- Define and communicate the DRAP's specific role within Durham's Regional Food System, with emphasis on its primary role as a protected agricultural land base.
- Support opportunities for farm stands, farm markets, community-supported agriculture, local distribution, and related activities where these would be farmer-led, feasible, and compatible with existing farm operations.
- Improve connections between the DRAP farmers and nearby residents, institutions, markets, food system partners, local and regional governments, and agricultural economic development initiatives.
- Explore opportunities for shared infrastructure such as wash/pack facilities, cold storage, aggregation, distribution, or marketing support, where there is demonstrated farmer interest and a viable implementation partner.

- Ensure DRAP is recognized as a priority protected agricultural land base within Durham Region's Agricultural System Approach, while identifying practical ways the DRAP can support regional food system goals.
- Reinforce the connection between farmland protection, food security, local food access, and the long-term viability of local agricultural production.
- Avoid implying that DRAP agriculture must shift toward direct-market or local food production; instead, support those opportunities where they complement viable farm businesses and the broader Agricultural System.

Goal 7: Strengthen the agri-food network that supports farming in and around the DRAP

The DRAP cannot be understood as an isolated land base. Its success depends on the broader Agricultural System that supports farming across the surrounding agricultural landscape. In Ontario's land use planning terms, the Agricultural System approach to planning includes both the agricultural land base and the agri-food network: the infrastructure, services, markets, transportation routes, processing capacity, input suppliers, farm businesses, and agriculture-supportive communities that allow farming to function effectively. Having an Agricultural Systems approach to planning is a requirement of the current planning system in Ontario.

This broader network includes agricultural lands within and around the DRAP, the Federal Pickering Lands, the Rouge National Urban Park, and other nearby agricultural lands. While each of these areas has different ownership, management, and policy conditions, together they influence the continuity, viability, and visibility of agriculture at the urban edge.

The decline of agricultural support services can affect the viability and flexibility of farm operations. This includes equipment dealers, feed mills, input suppliers, abattoirs, veterinary services, processing capacity, storage, custom operators, transportation and distribution infrastructure. As these services become more distant or less available, farming can become more costly, less efficient, and less able to diversify or respond to market opportunities.

Strengthening the DRAP's agricultural future therefore requires attention to the wider network of services, facilities, and relationships that enable farming to function effectively. As privately owned land, the DRAP may present unique opportunities not available in the same way as on federally owned or publicly managed lands.



Objectives:

- Recognize the DRAP as part of a broader Agricultural System rather than as a stand-alone protected area.
- Identify gaps in agricultural services, infrastructure, processing, storage, distribution, and input supply that affect farming in and around DRAP.
- Support partnerships that improve access to agricultural services, infrastructure, processing, storage, distribution, and farm business supports.
- Strengthen connections between the DRAP and surrounding agricultural lands, agricultural service providers, markets, farm organizations, and regional economic development partners.
- Consider how continued agricultural production within the DRAP helps sustain agricultural activity and farm services beyond its boundaries.
- Coordinate with planning and economic development partners to ensure that the needs of agriculture are reflected in broader regional infrastructure, employment, transportation, and economic development strategies.

Goal 8: Align infrastructure, servicing, and land use decisions with agricultural needs

Infrastructure, servicing, and land use decisions affecting the DRAP should be planned and implemented in a manner that supports, rather than disrupts, agricultural operations.

This does not mean that all infrastructure affecting or adjacent to the DRAP can or should be avoided. Roads, utilities, servicing, rail or transit projects, drainage works, and other infrastructure may be required to serve existing communities, surrounding growth areas, regional systems, or public needs. However, where infrastructure is proposed within, adjacent to, or functionally connected to the DRAP, it should be assessed and designed through an agricultural impact lens from the earliest stages of planning.

Although infrastructure may be required to serve surrounding communities and regional growth, its design and implementation can have significant implications for farm access, field configuration, drainage, soil conditions, equipment movement, and the overall efficiency of farm operations. This goal recognizes that agricultural lands can be permanently protected on paper while still being incrementally affected by infrastructure and servicing decisions. A stronger agricultural lens is needed to ensure that impacts to farming are avoided where possible, minimized where unavoidable, and mitigated where they occur. Where appropriate, infrastructure should also be designed proactively to support agricultural operations, such as by maintaining or improving farm entrances, drainage outlets, turning movements, road shoulders, sightlines, safe equipment movement, or other design features that help farmers move between fields and operate efficiently.

Objectives:

- Apply an agricultural impact lens to road, utility, rail, servicing, and other infrastructure projects affecting or potentially affecting the DRAP.
- Ensure infrastructure planning demonstrates how agricultural impacts will be avoided, minimized, and mitigated, including impacts to field access, drainage, field configuration, soil conditions, equipment movement, construction timing, and long-term farm operational efficiency.
- Design infrastructure to support agricultural operations, including maintenance of field contiguity, drainage continuity, farm entrances, and safe equipment movement, including regular upkeep to roadside brush and shoulders.
- Consider farm equipment turning radii, road shoulders and guardrails, roadside tree maintenance, signage placement, roundabouts, traffic signals, road widths, construction timing, and access routes in infrastructure design.
- Minimize further fragmentation or operational disruption to the agricultural land base.
- Ensure that affected farmers are consulted early when infrastructure projects may affect their operations.

Goal 9: Advance ecological stewardship within an agriculture-first landscape

The DRAP's primary purpose is agricultural, but the DRAP also contributes to ecological connectivity, watershed health, natural heritage protection, and climate resilience. Agricultural use and environmental stewardship should be understood as complementary objectives where they are carefully planned and appropriately managed.

Future stewardship should protect and enhance natural features while maintaining the integrity, productivity, and continuity of the agricultural land base. This includes recognizing the role that riparian areas, wetlands, woodlots, hedgerows, grassed buffers, soils, and water systems can play in supporting ecological connectivity and long-term agricultural resilience[14]. The DRAP should remain agriculture-first, while recognizing that healthy soils, water systems, habitat connections, and climate resilience are also important to the long-term success of farming.


Photo by OFT

Stewardship initiatives should be practical, voluntary where appropriate, and developed with farmers and landowners. They should be supported through technical assistance, incentives, and funding, particularly where stewardship actions provide broader public benefits such as improved water quality, habitat connectivity, soil health, or climate resilience. Restoration, recreation, or public access initiatives should not be advanced in ways that fragment farmland, interfere with drainage or equipment movement, reduce productive agricultural capacity, or undermine viable farm operations.

Objectives:

- Support the continued use and adoption of agricultural Beneficial Management Practices (BMPs) appropriate to farm operations, site conditions, and long-term soil, water and natural heritage stewardship.
- Maintain agriculture as the primary land use and organizing principle for the DRAP.
- Protect and enhance natural heritage features, riparian areas, wetlands, woodlots, hedgerows, and ecological connections in a manner compatible with active farming.
- Support soil health, drainage, water quality, biodiversity, climate resilience, and watershed health.
- Encourage stewardship practices that benefit both agricultural productivity and environmental function.
- Ensure ecological restoration or enhancement projects are designed to avoid fragmentation of productive farmland and to maintain field access, drainage, and farm operational efficiency.
- Avoid natural heritage, recreation, or public access initiatives that fragment farmland or undermine viable farm operations.

Goal 10: Improve public awareness, identity, and respect for the DRAP

Public awareness of the DRAP remains uneven and often limited. Some residents and community members are familiar with the DRAP and its history, while most have limited understanding of its purpose, boundaries, significance, or continued agricultural function. This creates an opportunity to strengthen the DRAP's public identity as an agriculture-first landscape and to build a broader understanding of why the DRAP matters.

This awareness gap is not limited to the DRAP. Public understanding of agriculture is often limited more generally, including why certain lands are especially well suited to farming, why high-quality farmland cannot simply be replaced elsewhere, and why agriculture depends on both productive land and a viable operating environment. Despite its critical importance for food sovereignty, many people may not fully understand the importance of agriculture as an economic sector, the role of farmland in food system resilience, or the fact that without the land base, agriculture is not possible. Improving public understanding of these issues can help build long-term support for farmland protection, working farms, and the farmers who steward the land.

Improved awareness should not convert the DRAP into a recreational landscape or encourage unmanaged public access onto private farmland. Rather, it should help residents, visitors, decision-makers, and surrounding communities understand why the DRAP exists, why it is protected, how it differs from the Rouge National Urban Park, and how active farming contributes to the public value of the landscape.

Public education should also support respectful behaviour around working farms. As nearby urban areas continue to grow, clear communication will be needed to reduce land use conflicts, discourage trespassing, improve understanding of normal farm practices, and reinforce that the DRAP is a protected agricultural area made up largely of privately owned and actively farmed lands.

Objectives:

- Clearly communicate that the DRAP is a working agricultural landscape, not a park or recreational area.
- Increase public understanding of the DRAP's history, agricultural role, ecological connections, agricultural easements, and Greenbelt significance.
- Strengthen the public identity of the DRAP through clear signage, mapping, interpretation, and communication.
- Promote farm-respect messaging to reduce trespassing, illegal dumping, land use conflicts, unsafe road behaviour, and disruption to farm operations.
- Improve public understanding of normal farm practices, seasonal farm activity, private property, and safe road-sharing with farm equipment.
- Support educational activities such as workshops, webinars, tours, or public-facing events only where they are compatible with farming and undertaken with willing farmers and landowners.

Goal 11: Establish governance, accountability, and measurable implementation

Success of a long-term vision for the agricultural future of the DRAP will be more likely if it is supported by clear governance, accountability, funding, and implementation capacity. The DRAP's complexity, including multiple levels of government, private landowners, tenant farmers, agricultural organizations, conservation interests, infrastructure agencies, and community stakeholders, requires a coordinated structure for implementation.

This goal responds to the need for the vision to move beyond aspiration and identify how progress can be advanced. Implementation should be practical, staged, transparent, and capable of adapting over time as conditions change. It should also recognize that not every recommendation can be implemented by the same partner, on the same timeline, or through the same funding source.



Photo by Land Over Landings

Some actions may be led by the Province, Durham Region, the City of Pickering, or public agencies; others may depend on landowner participation, farmer interest, agricultural organizations, conservation partners, or non-profit organizations.

Governance should therefore provide a way to coordinate action, assign responsibility, identify resources, monitor progress, and address barriers as they arise. Without a clear implementation structure, even strong policy directions risk remaining aspirational.

Objectives:

- Establish a coordinated implementation body, such as a DRAP Agricultural Implementation Table, DRAP Stewardship Council, or similar entity, jointly convened by and accountable to the Province of Ontario and Durham Region with clear terms of reference.
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of lead agencies, implementation partners, landowners, farm organizations, and supporting organizations for each major recommendation, where applicable.
- Establish realistic implementation timelines, including near-term, medium-term, and long-term actions.
- Identify funding sources and resourcing requirements for implementation, including provincial, regional, municipal, federal, philanthropic, and partnership-based opportunities.
- Ensure farmers and farm organizations have a meaningful role in implementation.
- Create a process for engaging landowners where implementation depends on lease terms, access arrangements, infrastructure permissions, stewardship projects, or land management decisions.
- Address implementation risks, including non-aligned ownership interests, infrastructure pressures, policy uncertainty, limited funding capacity, and competing public agency mandates.
- Establish benchmarks and create a monitoring and evaluation framework to track progress over time.

Collectively, these goals define the long-term outcomes this vision seeks to achieve for the DRAP. They establish the basis for evaluating whether DRAP is not only protected, but also actively farmed, economically viable, well stewarded, publicly understood, and supported by the conditions needed for agriculture to thrive. The following Vision Pillars organize these goals into a framework for action, identifying the major areas where policy, planning, stewardship, investment, and partnership will be required.

2.3 VISION PILLARS

The 11 goals identify the long-term outcomes this vision seeks to achieve. The following seven Vision Pillars and one Foundational Element consolidate the goals into a set of implementation themes. Each pillar identifies where policy, planning, stewardship, investment, and partnership will be required. The pillars do not replace the goals; rather, they organize the goals into a practical framework for implementation.

Several themes cut across more than one pillar. Permanent protection, farmer confidence, landowner alignment, infrastructure coordination, ecological stewardship, public understanding, and implementation accountability are mutually reinforcing conditions. The vision will be strongest where these themes are advanced together rather than treated as separate or competing priorities.

Vision Pillar	Related Goals
Permanent Protection and Policy Certainty	Goals 1, 3, 11
Agricultural Viability, Farmer Support, and Landowner Alignment	Goals 2, 3, 4
A Resilient, Diversified, and Well-Stewarded Agricultural System	Goals 5, 7, 9
Integration with Durham's Regional Food System	Goal 6
Infrastructure, Servicing, and Land Use Coordination	Goals 4, 8
Strengthening the Agricultural Support Network	Goals 5, 7
Public Awareness, Identity, and Respect for the Preserve	Goal 10
Foundational Element: Governance, Accountability, and Implementation	Related Goal; Goal 11

Pillar 1: Permanent Protection and Policy Certainty

The long-term future of the DRAP depends on a comprehensive, durable and actively implemented system of protections that extends beyond individual policy instruments. This includes the continued role of the Provincial Planning Statement, the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act, the Greenbelt Plan, Durham Region and City of Pickering Official Plan policies, zoning, and the agricultural conservation easements registered on title[15].

These tools have already demonstrated their importance. The DRAP has remained protected despite significant development pressure, speculative ownership interests, and a temporary removal and reinstatement of Greenbelt and DRAP Act protections[16]. However, protection must be more than a set of designations. It must be actively implemented, monitored, and aligned with the agricultural purpose of the DRAP.

Achieving this pillar will require clear responsibility for stewardship and oversight. Provincial, regional, and municipal governments should work together with easement holders, agricultural organizations, farmers, landowners, and conservation partners to ensure that existing protections are upheld and that any future planning decisions reinforce the permanent agricultural purpose of the lands. This may include a DRAP-specific implementation framework, regular easement monitoring, clearer review processes for proposed land use or infrastructure changes, and a formal mechanism to coordinate agencies with responsibility for the DRAP.

Pillar 2: Agricultural Viability, Farmer Support, and Landowner Alignment

The success of the DRAP will be grounded in the strength of its farming community, but it also depends on the decisions of landowners. Farmers bring the knowledge, equipment, labour, business relationships, and practical experience needed to keep the DRAP productive. Landowners control access to land, lease terms, permission for improvements, and the stability farmers need to plan for the future. A successful vision must therefore recognize both groups.

Supporting agriculture in the DRAP means creating conditions that enable farmers to invest, adapt, and make business decisions with confidence. This includes addressing the unique challenges of peri-urban agriculture, improving access to land, and creating conditions that enable long-term investment and operational stability. It also requires landowners to participate in good faith in the agricultural purpose of the DRAP, including by offering lease terms and management arrangements that support active farming, including clear permissions for agriculture-related and on-farm diversified uses where appropriate.

This pillar also includes support for farm succession and pathways for new and young farmers. Where appropriate, smaller parcels, utility corridor lands, field edges, or other underutilized areas may provide entry points for new farm businesses, incubator plots, market gardening, or specialized agricultural enterprises. These opportunities should be pursued in ways that complement existing farm operations and do not undermine the viability of current farmers.

Pillar 3: A Resilient, Diversified, and Well-Stewarded Agricultural System

The DRAP should be understood as part of Ontario's Agricultural System. In provincial planning terms, the Agricultural System includes both the agricultural land base and the agri-food network that supports agriculture. This includes farmland, farm operations, agricultural services, transportation routes, processing, distribution, markets, infrastructure, and agriculture-supportive communities.

The Provincial Planning Statement, Greenbelt Plan, the DRAP Act, Durham Regional Official Plan, and City of Pickering Official Plan all contribute to this system by protecting agricultural land and guiding compatible land use. However, the policy framework should also support the conditions that allow agriculture to remain viable. This means reducing fragmentation, maintaining the continuity of the agricultural land base, supporting farm infrastructure, and ensuring that surrounding growth and infrastructure decisions do not undermine farm operations.

Increased resilience of the Agricultural System in the DRAP may include a broader range of agricultural activities over time, but diversification should be farmer-led and grounded in business realities. The goal is not to direct farmers away from field crop production or prescribe what they should grow. Rather, the goal is to ensure that farmers who wish to diversify into other forms of production, agriculture-related uses, direct-market activity, livestock, horticulture, or on-farm diversified enterprises are not prevented from doing so by short-term tenure, uncertain permissions, lack of infrastructure, or landowner misalignment and are instead encouraged and supported through the process.

Resilience also includes stewardship. The DRAP's primary purpose is agricultural, but healthy soils, functional drainage, water quality, riparian areas, wetlands, woodlots, hedgerows, habitat connections, and climate resilience all contribute to the long-term success of farming. Ecological stewardship should therefore be advanced in ways that are compatible with active agriculture, provide support for farmers and landowners, and are designed to protect the integrity, productivity, and continuity of the agricultural land base.

Pillar 4: Integration with Durham's Regional Food System

The DRAP is an important agricultural land base within Durham Region's broader food system. While the Agricultural System focuses on the land use and agri-food network needed to support agriculture, the Durham Regional Food System has a more extensive scope. It includes the hallmarks of the agri-food network, such as production, processing and distribution, but further includes discussions of food access, food literacy, community food security, environmental sustainability, public health, economic development, and community partnerships[17].

This pillar should be advanced in partnership with Durham Region, including its planning, agriculture, economic development, and community food system functions. Durham Region's Community Growth and Economic Development Department may have an important role in connecting DRAP to broader regional priorities around agri-food entrepreneurship, local food infrastructure, business retention and expansion, rural economic development, and market opportunities[18].

Integration with the regional food system does not mean that all food produced in the DRAP must be sold locally or through direct markets. Field crops remain part of the broader agri-food economy. However, where farmers are interested, DRAP's proximity to Pickering, Durham Region, and the Greater Toronto Area creates opportunities for farmgate sales, local food distribution, agri-food education, and stronger public understanding of the relationship between farmland protection and food system resilience. This aligns with the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance Action Plan, which emphasizes coordinated action to support food and farming viability and to strengthen the Golden Horseshoe's role as a leading agriculture and agri-food cluster[19].

Pillar 5: Infrastructure, Servicing and Land Use Coordination

Future infrastructure, servicing, and land use decisions affecting the DRAP must be planned and implemented in a manner that supports, rather than disrupts, agricultural operations. This includes maintaining field continuity, ensuring the safe and efficient movement of farm equipment, and minimizing further fragmentation of the agricultural land base. Roads, ditches, culverts, bridges, hydro corridors, servicing infrastructure, rail or transit projects, and nearby development all influence whether farming can be carried out efficiently and safely.

This pillar requires practical coordination. Durham Region, the City of Pickering, provincial agencies, utility providers, and infrastructure proponents should engage farmers early when infrastructure projects may affect farm access or operations. A framework for considering agriculture should be developed and embedded into project planning from the beginning. Such a framework could include considerations for field entrances, turning movements, road shoulders, sightlines, roadside tree and brush maintenance, ditch cleanouts, drainage continuity, and the safe movement of large farm equipment.

Where infrastructure projects are unavoidable, impacts to agriculture should be avoided where possible, minimized where unavoidable, and mitigated where they occur. This may include preserving field contiguity, restoring entrances, avoiding unnecessary fragmentation, coordinating construction timing with farming seasons, maintaining drainage outlets, and designing roads and intersections with agricultural equipment in mind. In areas where infrastructure intersects with natural heritage features, road ecology and wildlife passage should also be considered, provided these measures are designed in a way that does not impair agricultural access or farm operational efficiency.



Figure 2: *This map illustrates the transportation and utility infrastructure within and surrounding the DRAP, including the road hierarchy, railway, Trans-Northern Pipeline, hydro corridor, utility lines, and proposed Seaton roads*

Pillar 6: Strengthening the Agricultural Support Network

Recognizing that farming depends on more than land alone, the vision supports the strengthening of the broader agricultural support system that enables farming to function effectively. This network includes both input-side and output-side needs. Input-side needs include access to seed, feed, fertilizer, soil amendments, crop protection products, equipment, repairs, fuel, labour, veterinary services, custom service operators, drainage contractors, technical advice, financing, and other services needed to produce agricultural goods. Output-side needs include access to buyers, markets, storage, drying, aggregation, processing, abattoirs, transportation, distribution, farmgate and direct-market channels, and other infrastructure needed to move agricultural products from farm to market. The decline or relocation of these services can make farming more costly and less attractive, especially in near-urban areas where agricultural land is increasingly isolated.

The future of the DRAP should therefore be considered in relation to the broader agricultural support network in Durham Region and neighbouring areas. Regional and municipal economic development efforts should identify gaps in both input-side and output-side agricultural services and explore ways to retain, attract, or support businesses that serve the farm sector.

This could include nearby agriculture-related employment areas, shared infrastructure, farm business services, aggregation and distribution facilities, and support for agriculture-related enterprises that help farmers operate efficiently.

This pillar should be led by economic development, agricultural, and land use planning partners working together. Strengthening the support network will require collaboration among Durham Region, the City of Pickering, farm organizations, agricultural businesses, farmers, landowners, provincial agencies, and agricultural advisory bodies such as the Durham Agricultural Advisory Committee.

Pillar 7: Public Awareness, Identity, and Respect for the DRAP

Improving awareness and understanding of the DRAP will help reinforce its identity and long-term value. Many residents are not familiar with the DRAP's history, purpose, boundaries, agricultural easements, relationship to the Greenbelt, or distinction from nearby Rouge National Urban Park[20]. Without stronger public understanding, the DRAP may be seen only as vacant land, scenery, or future development land rather than as a working agricultural area with long-term public value.

Education and outreach should therefore be a core pillar of the vision. This could include gateway signage, interpretive signage on public rights-of-way, a DRAP website or digital story map, school resources, workshops, webinars, farm and food system education, public presentations, and communication materials for nearby residents about normal farm practices and respectful behaviour around working farms.

This work will require funding and coordination. Potential partners include the Ontario Farmland Trust, Durham Region, the City of Pickering, the Greenbelt Foundation, Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance, agricultural organizations, conservation partners, schools, community groups, and farmers. Public education should be designed carefully to increase appreciation for agriculture without encouraging unmanaged public access onto private farmland or creating new conflicts for farm operators.

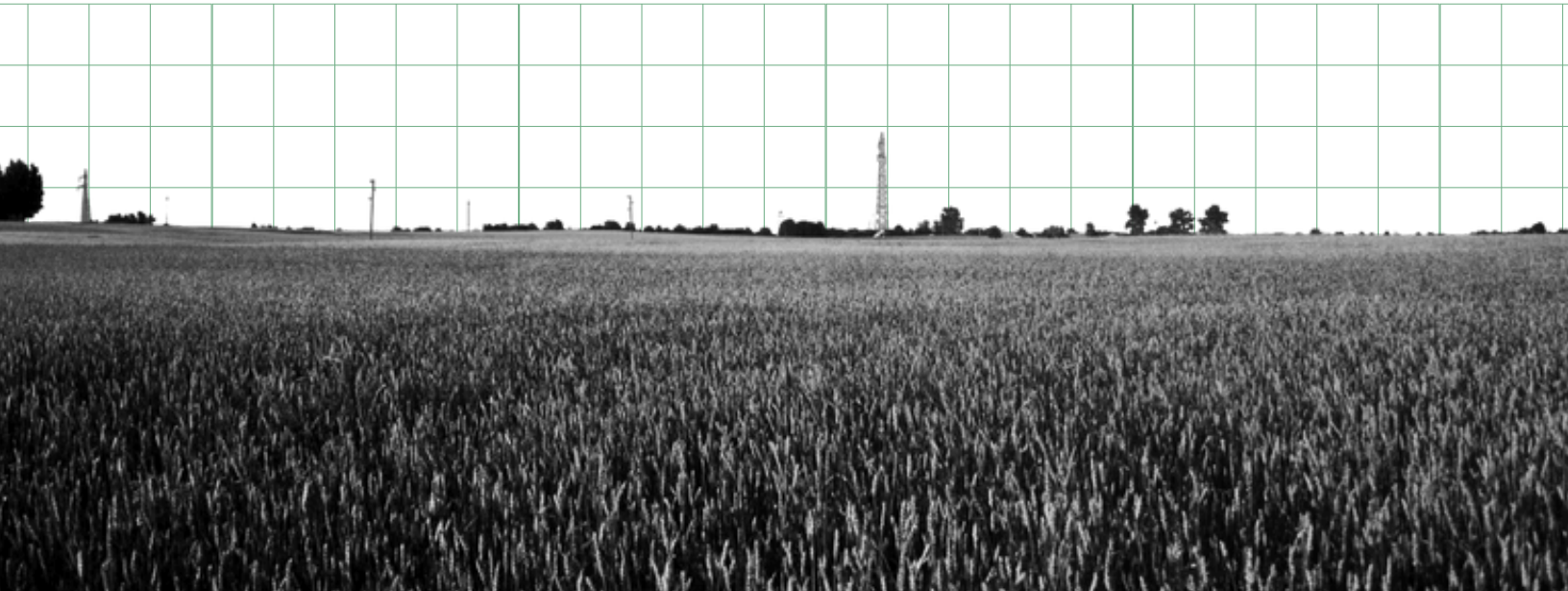



Photo by Land Over Landings

Foundational Element: Governance, Accountability, and Implementation

Governance, accountability, funding, and measurable implementation are cross-cutting requirements for all pillars. The pillars identify the major areas where action is needed, but progress will depend on clear roles, responsibilities, timelines, resources, and measures of success. These requirements should be addressed through the Strategic Vision Partners, Strategic Directions, implementation framework, and monitoring approach that follow in this report.

Together, these pillars provide the foundation for a more durable and practical vision for DRAP. They recognize that the DRAP's future depends on permanent protection, active farming, farmer confidence, landowner alignment, supportive policy, infrastructure coordination, economic viability, ecological stewardship, regional food system connections, public understanding, and implementation accountability. The vision is not simply to keep DRAP protected from development, but to ensure that it remains a vibrant, productive, and resilient agricultural area for generations to come.

2.4 STRATEGIC VISION PARTNERS

Achieving this vision will require shared responsibility. No single organization, level of government, landowner, or farmer can implement the vision alone. Different elements of the vision will require different lead partners and different forms of collaboration.

The Province has a central role in maintaining and strengthening the legislative and policy framework that protects DRAP, including the Greenbelt Plan, the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act (2023), and the broader approach to Agricultural System planning. Provincial leadership will also be important where changes to agricultural lease policy, infrastructure planning, or farmland protection tools are required.

Durham Region and the City of Pickering have important roles in local implementation through official plan policies, zoning, infrastructure planning, road design, servicing decisions, economic development, and public education. Their decisions will shape whether surrounding growth supports or undermines the long-term viability of farming in DRAP.
Landowners play a critical role because their decisions directly affect land access, lease security, farm investment, and the ability of farmers to plan for the future. Longer and more secure agricultural leases, support for farm infrastructure, and cooperation with the agricultural purpose of the easements would significantly improve the conditions for agricultural viability.

Farmers and agricultural organizations must remain central to the vision. Farmers are the primary stewards and operators of the land, and decisions about production, diversification, investment, and business planning must remain grounded in their expertise, capacity, and farm business realities. Agricultural organizations can help ensure that future policies and programs are practical, relevant, and aligned with the needs of the sector.
Conservation organizations, land trusts, and other non-profit partners, including the Ontario Farmland Trust, Conservation Authorities, and others, can support implementation through research, convening, land access partnerships, stewardship programming, public education, easement expertise, and collaboration with public agencies and farm organizations.

The surrounding community also has a role to play. Public understanding, local support, respectful engagement with working farms, participation in education opportunities, and advocacy for permanent farmland protection all contribute to the long-term durability of DRAP.
This vision is therefore both agricultural and collaborative. It depends on protecting the land, supporting those who farm it, aligning public policy with agricultural viability, and building a stronger shared understanding of why DRAP matters.

3. Context: A Landscape at a Crossroads

The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP) represents one of the most significant concentrations of protected agricultural land within Ontario's Greenbelt and is unique in Ontario as a designated agricultural preserve[24]. Located in the City of Pickering within Durham Region, the DRAP covers approximately 4,700 acres, contains high-quality agricultural land, has a long history of farming, and continues to be cultivated today[25]. Its importance lies not only in its acreage, but in the fact that it is a finite and non-renewable agricultural resource located at the edge of one of the fastest-growing urban regions in Canada[26].

The history of DRAP is closely tied to the broader history of land assembly in north Pickering. In 1972, the federal and provincial governments began expropriation of lands for a proposed Pickering Airport and supporting land uses; such as housing, commercial and industrial[27]. Roughly speaking, the federally expropriated land was located primarily north of Highway 7 and intended for the construction of the airport and supporting industry, while the provincially expropriated land was located primarily south of Highway 7 and was intended for a community and other supporting land uses. Although construction of the airport was quickly shelved just a few years following expropriation in 1975, the threat remained, as lands were now in the hands of both upper levels of government. The lands now forming DRAP were subsequently held in provincial ownership for many years until the early 1990's when discussions around forming an agricultural preserve began to take shape. After several years of planning, the lands now forming the DRAP were sold back into private ownership beginning in 1999, subject to agricultural easements intended to maintain the lands for agricultural use over the long term[28]. Much of this farming activity is carried out by operators based outside of the DRAP, reflecting the legacy of land expropriations and the subsequent sale of lands into private ownership.

The DRAP is therefore shaped by several overlapping layers of policy and planning: its agricultural easements, the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act, the Greenbelt Plan, the Central Pickering Development Plan[29], the development of Seaton, Durham Region and City of Pickering planning frameworks, and the ongoing future of the nearby Federal Pickering Lands, where the federal government has cancelled plans for airport development and is now exploring the transfer of a significant portion of these lands to Rouge National Urban Park[30]. These frameworks intersect with long-term urban growth planning because DRAP sits immediately adjacent to planned and expanding urban areas, major transportation corridors, servicing infrastructure, and lands that have been repeatedly considered in relation to future growth. Decisions about roads, servicing, settlement boundaries, infrastructure corridors, and surrounding land use directly affect the ability of farmers to move equipment, access land, maintain field continuity, manage drainage, and plan for long-term investment.



Figure 3 *The map illustrates existing land uses within the DRAP and the surrounding area, highlighting the Preserve's agricultural landscape in relation to nearby residential and employment areas, planned development.*

At the same time, the DRAP is also located beside a significant protected public landscape that includes agriculture. Rouge National Urban Park was established with a mandate that includes promoting a vibrant farming community, and portions of the Federal Pickering Lands have already been transferred to Parks Canada as part of the park's land base. Parks Canada's approach to agriculture, including longer-term farm leases and investment in a sustainable park farming community, provides an important adjacent example of how protected public lands can support agriculture over time. The potential transfer of additional high-conservation-value Federal Pickering Lands to Parks Canada could further strengthen the broader protected agricultural and ecological landscape around the DRAP.

Over time, the DRAP has continued to function as a productive agricultural area and as an important component of Ontario's Agricultural System and Durham Region's broader food system. In this report, "Agricultural System" is used as the defined term in Ontario's provincial planning framework. The Agricultural System is an approach that recognizes both the agricultural land base and the agri-food network, and seeks to maintain and enhance the geographic continuity of agricultural lands as well as the functional and economic connections that support the agri-food sector. In this context, DRAP's value is tied not only to its soils and active farm production, but also to its relationship with surrounding farmland, agricultural services, transportation routes, infrastructure, markets, and the broader conditions that allow agriculture to remain viable.

The Durham Regional Food System is broader. It includes the Agricultural System, but also extends to the social, cultural, environmental, economic, and governance dimensions of food. This includes food access, food literacy, community food security, Indigenous food sovereignty, local food availability, processing and distribution, sustainable production, farm and food system worker well-being, and public understanding of agriculture and food systems[31]. DRAP is not a food system on its own; rather, it is a significant agricultural land base within Durham's regional food system and the broader Ontario agri-food economy. Its long-term protection and viability matter because resilient regional food systems depend on secure farmland, viable farm businesses, appropriate infrastructure, localized production and distribution opportunities,and strong public understanding of the role agriculture plays in community well-being.

Historically, agriculture in and around the DRAP included a broader mix of agricultural activities than is more common today, including livestock operations, dairy and beef production, forage and pasture, mixed farming, and some forms of fruit, vegetable, and direct-market production[31]. In more recent years, agricultural production within the DRAP has largely centered on a crop rotation of corn, soybeans, and wheat[33]. This shift reflects broader trends in Ontario agriculture, including farm consolidation and tenure models, specialization, rising costs, and the decline of nearby agricultural services. However, it also reflects the specific conditions within DRAP, including land ownership patterns, the prevalence of rented land, short-term or year-to-year lease arrangements, uncertainty regarding the permanence of agricultural use, and limited incentives for major farm infrastructure investment. These conditions have made it more difficult for farmers to justify long-term investments in diversified, capital-intensive, or labour-intensive agricultural enterprises.

This does not diminish the productivity or importance of the land. Farmers operating within the DRAP have sustained active production under complex and often uncertain conditions. Their knowledge of the land, their continued investment of time and skill, and their ability to maintain production through decades of changing policy direction reinforce the importance of DRAP as a working agricultural area. However, protecting land on paper is not the same as creating the conditions for a vibrant agricultural future. Long-term agricultural viability depends on stable tenure, supportive policy, appropriate infrastructure, respect for farm business decision-making, and a surrounding land use context that does not undermine farming.

Uncertainty has been a recurring feature of DRAP's history. Agricultural easements held by the City of Pickering were intended to provide long-term protection and certainty after decades of public ownership and shifting expectations for the lands. However, uncertainty persisted because much of the land was transferred into private ownership, including ownership by parties with long-term development interests. In 2005, the Province intervened through the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act after the City of Pickering released the agricultural easements to allow for development. The Act reinstated the easements. Further tension became visible in 2022, when the Province repealed the Act and removed the lands from the Greenbelt, before reinstating protections in 2023.[34] That sequence demonstrated that even highly protected agricultural lands can remain vulnerable when protection depends on policy frameworks that can be altered.

Today, the DRAP stands at a critical point in history. Its future will depend not only on its physical characteristics and policy framework, but also on its ability to support viable farm operations,

provide certainty for those working the land, and reinforce its role within a resilient Agricultural System. Upcoming and ongoing decisions related to the Greenbelt Plan, municipal and regional planning, major infrastructure, the Alto high-speed rail project, and the future of the Federal Pickering Lands may all influence the broader agricultural landscape in which DRAP sits.[35] These decisions could affect farmland continuity, farm equipment movement, agricultural services, DRAP's relationship with nearby protected lands, and the confidence farmers need to invest.

This report responds to this set of circumstances by establishing a vision for the DRAP as a permanently protected and actively farmed agricultural area. The vision is grounded in the DRAP's agricultural strengths, informed by engagement with farmers, residents, landowners, agricultural organizations, and other stakeholders, and focused on identifying practical ways to support long-term agricultural viability. It recognizes that the DRAP has public value beyond individual ownership: the conservation easements and policy framework reflect a long-standing public interest in keeping these lands in agriculture. Strengthening that public value requires not only maintaining protection, but ensuring that DRAP can continue to function as a vibrant agricultural area for generations to come.

The DRAP is therefore more than a collection of privately-owned farm parcels. It is a finite agricultural resource, a protected Greenbelt landscape, a working farm area, and a place where competing expectations about growth, land ownership, public benefit, and agricultural permanence continue to meet. The challenge for this vision is to move beyond simply defending the existence of the DRAP and toward creating the conditions that allow agriculture within the DRAP to endure, adapt, and thrive.

4. Policy and Planning Framework

The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP) exists within a layered provincial, regional, municipal, and property-specific policy and legal framework. These layers include the Planning Act, the Provincial Planning Statement, the Greenbelt Plan, the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act, Durham Region and City of Pickering official plan policies, the City of Pickering Zoning By-law, and agricultural easements registered on title. Together, these instruments establish an unusually robust framework intended to maintain the lands for long-term agricultural use.

The strength of this framework is important to recognize. DRAP has been subject to extraordinary development pressure, speculative ownership interests, shifting provincial policy direction, and repeated debate about its long-term future. In OFT's view, more typical land use planning protections, such as a Prime Agricultural Area designation alone, would likely have been insufficient to withstand this level of pressure. The challenge now is to ensure that the protections continue to do more than prevent development: they must also support a viable, active, and resilient agricultural future.

4.1 Provincial Planning Framework

In Ontario, land use planning is a core provincial responsibility implemented through the Planning Act, provincial policy, provincial plans, and municipal planning instruments. The Planning Act identifies “the protection of the agricultural resources of the Province” as a matter of provincial interest[37]. This interest is further implemented through the Provincial Planning Statement, which directs planning authorities to protect *Prime Agricultural Areas* for long-term agricultural use.

The Provincial Planning Statement permits agricultural uses, agriculture-related uses, and on-farm diversified uses in *Prime Agricultural Areas*[38]. This is important for the DRAP because agricultural protection should not be understood as limiting the DRAP to a narrow range of production activities. Rather, provincial policy recognizes that farm viability may be supported by a range of compatible agricultural, agriculture-related, and diversified uses, provided they remain appropriate to the agricultural context.

The DRAP also forms part of Ontario’s Agricultural System. In provincial land use planning, the Agricultural System includes two related components: the agricultural land base and the agri-food network[39]. The agricultural land base includes *Prime Agricultural Areas, Specialty Crop Areas*, and *Rural Lands* that together create a continuous productive land base for agriculture. The agri-food network includes the infrastructure, services, transportation routes, farm markets, distributors, primary processing, on-farm infrastructure, and agriculture-supportive communities that support the viability of the agri-food sector.

This distinction is important. The DRAP is not simply a collection of protected parcels. It is part of a broader Agricultural System whose viability depends on the continuity of farmland, the ability of farmers to move equipment safely and efficiently, access to drainage and other farm infrastructure, nearby agricultural services, market access, and supportive surrounding land uses. Policy decisions affecting the DRAP should therefore be evaluated not only in terms of whether farmland is physically protected, but also in terms of whether the broader conditions needed for agriculture to function are maintained or improved.



4.2 Greenbelt Plan and Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act

The entirety of the DRAP is located within Ontario's Greenbelt and forms part of the Greenbelt Protected Countryside[40]. Within this framework, the DRAP is identified as part of a protected agricultural landscape where long-term agricultural use is the primary land use objective.

The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act (2005, 2023) provides a further, place-specific layer of protection. Unlike broader agricultural policies that apply across many areas of the province, the DRAP Act reflects the unique history and purpose of the DRAP. It affirms that these lands are to be maintained for agricultural and agriculture-related uses and provides a statutory basis for protecting the area as an agricultural preserve[41].

The repeal of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act (2005) and removal of the lands from the Greenbelt in 2022, followed by reinstatement of protections in 2023, demonstrated both the vulnerability and resilience of the existing framework[42]. On one hand, the events showed that even highly protected agricultural lands can remain vulnerable when protections are subject to political change. On the other hand, the reinstatement of protections confirmed the continuing public, policy, and agricultural importance of the DRAP. This recent history underscores the need for a clear long-term vision that strengthens both the legal protection and the practical agricultural viability of the DRAP.



Photo by OFT

4.3 Regional and Municipal Planning Framework

At the regional level, the DRAP is primarily designated as *Prime Agricultural Area* in the Durham Regional Official Plan, which encourages the use of an Agricultural System approach to planning for the agricultural landbase and the agri-food network[43]. The Regional Official Plan also recognizes settlement areas and environmentally sensitive areas within and around the DRAP. Applicable policies situate the DRAP as being part of the Agricultural System within Durham's broader agricultural, environmental, and growth management framework. The agri-food network is mentioned as a component of the Agricultural System, which is supported by specific policies intended to protect farmland, support farm viability, minimize land use conflicts and recognize the agricultural industry's heritage and contributions to the economic base of the Region.

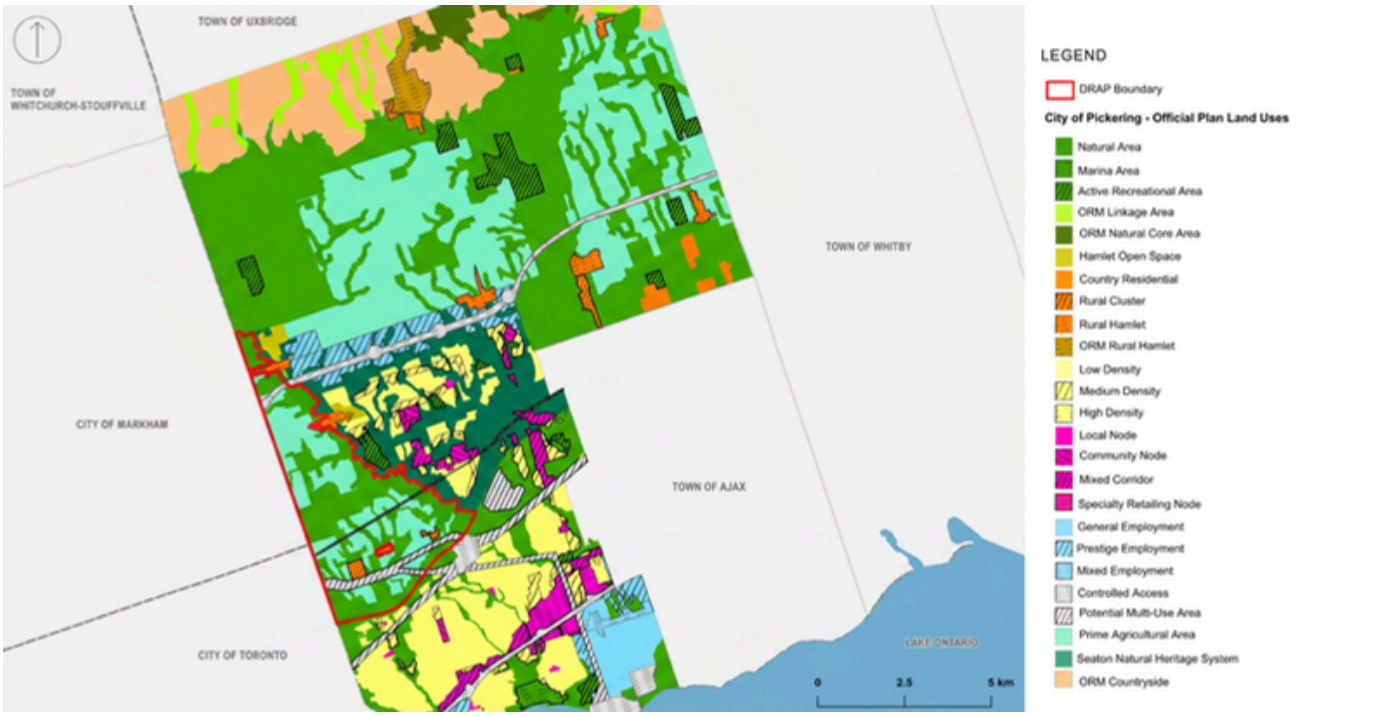


Figure 4: *The map illustrates the DRAP within the broader City of Pickering land use framework, highlighting surrounding agricultural, residential, employment, natural heritage, open space, and mixed-use designations*

At the local level, the City of Pickering Official Plan provides more detailed land use designations for the DRAP, including *Prime Agricultural Areas, Natural Areas*, hamlets, and settlement areas within or adjacent to DRAP[44]. These local designations are important because many of the practical conditions affecting agriculture are shaped at the municipal level, including roads, servicing, zoning, land use compatibility, settlement area boundaries, and permissions for agriculture-related and on-farm diversified uses.

The high-voltage hydro corridor through the southern portion of the DRAP is zoned *Utility*. This zoning is more restrictive and treats existing agricultural uses as legal non-conforming uses, limiting the ability to establish new agricultural uses within the corridor. This creates a potential disconnect between the zoning framework and the broader vision for DRAP as an active agricultural area. Given community interest in small-scale food production, diversified agriculture, and farmgate access, the hydro corridor may warrant further review as a potential opportunity area for compatible agricultural uses, provided safety, access, servicing, and utility requirements can be addressed.

4.4 Agricultural Easements

The agricultural easements registered on title provide a critical property-specific layer of protection. These easements were established as part of the original framework for conveying the lands from public ownership into private ownership while maintaining their long-term agricultural purpose. The 1999 agreement between the Ontario Realty Corporation, the Region of Durham, and the Town of Pickering (now City of Pickering) required agricultural easements to be executed and registered on title for applicable lands conveyed into private ownership[45]. The easements were intended to bind successors in title, meaning that future owners would remain subject to the agricultural restrictions and obligations. The purpose clause of the agricultural easement is central to understanding the long-term intent of the DRAP. It states that,

> the Purpose of this agricultural easement to conserve and maintain the Property for agricultural use and to enable the restoration and enhancement of the Property for agricultural purposes by preserving and protecting the agricultural capability of the soil and the character, potential and actual use of the Property for agriculture, and to prevent any use of the Property that would significantly impair or interfere with that purpose. To the extent that the conservation of natural and open space values of the Property is consistent with the foregoing, it is within the purpose of this agricultural easement to protect those values of the land[46].

This language is important for two reasons. First, it confirms that the primary purpose of the easements is agricultural. The conservation of natural and open space values is included, but it is secondary to and must be consistent with the agricultural purpose of the lands. Second, the easements are not intended to freeze agriculture in one form or limit the lands to a single type of production. In the opinion of the Ontario Farmland Trust, the permitted uses defined within Schedule B of the agricultural easements are broad enough to support a range of primary agricultural uses, complementary and supportive agricultural uses, and compatible agricultural enterprises that would now generally be understood as agriculture-related uses or on-farm diversified uses[47]. Properly interpreted, the easements should not prevent diversified agricultural activity where that activity supports the viability of a primary agricultural operation and remains consistent with the agricultural purpose of the property.

At the same time, the easement framework has produced mixed outcomes. The easements have helped prevent conversion of the lands to non-agricultural development and have therefore performed an essential protective function. However, the sale of protected lands at values reflecting agricultural restrictions also created an unintended vulnerability: it made acquisition more financially accessible to non-farm and speculative purchasers than would otherwise have been the case if the lands had been sold at development-influenced values[48]. As a result, a significant portion of the lands have become owned by parties whose long-term interests were not aligned with agricultural permanence, even though the lands remained subject to agricultural easements.

This tension is central to the DRAP's current situation. The easements have helped keep the land in agriculture, but they have not, on their own, ensured farmer ownership, long-term tenure security, reinvestment in farm infrastructure, or a diversified agricultural economy. This does not mean the easements have failed. Rather, it means that easements are necessary but not sufficient. To achieve the long-term vision for the DRAP, the easement framework must be supported by complementary policies, partnerships, and implementation tools that address the practical conditions needed for agriculture to remain viable.

The policy and legal framework for the DRAP should be understood as a foundation, not a complete solution. The existing framework has succeeded in maintaining the DRAP as an agricultural area under intense pressure. However, the next phase of work must focus on strengthening the conditions that allow agriculture to endure and evolve



Photo by Land Over Landings

5. Why This Land Matters

The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP) matters because it is not only protected farmland; it is a finite resource required for most food production and is located within one of the fastest-growing urban regions in Canada[49]. Its significance is agricultural, ecological, strategic, and community-based. Understanding these overlapping values is essential to establishing a vision that is both ambitious and practical.

5.1 Agricultural Capability and Productive Value

At its foundation, the value of the DRAP lies in its agricultural capability. The DRAP contains a substantial concentration of prime agricultural land, including high-quality soils capable of supporting consistent crop production[50]. This agricultural capability is discussed further in Section 6.3 and illustrated through soil classification mapping in Figure 9. In a province and country where high-quality farmland is finite, non-renewable, and increasingly under pressure from urban expansion, the continued protection and active use of these lands is important to the long-term resilience of Ontario's agricultural land base[51]. The DRAP's proximity to the Greater Toronto Area further enhances their importance, positioning the DRAP as a key contributor to regional food production and supply.

The DRAP's current production profile is largely centred on field crops, particularly corn, soybeans, and wheat, as illustrated in Figure 5[52]. This crop inventory demonstrates that the DRAP continues to function as an active agricultural landscape, not simply as protected open space. These crops remain an important part of Ontario's agri-food economy and should not be dismissed as less valuable simply because they are less visible to nearby residents than farm markets, livestock, fruit, vegetables, or direct-market agriculture. Field crop production contributes to feed, food-grade markets, seed, export markets, and other supply chains that support the broader agri-food sector[53]. At the same time, the current dominance of field crops reflects both broader agricultural trends and the specific conditions within DRAP, including land tenure, ownership patterns, limited infrastructure investment, and uncertainty regarding the long-term future of the lands.

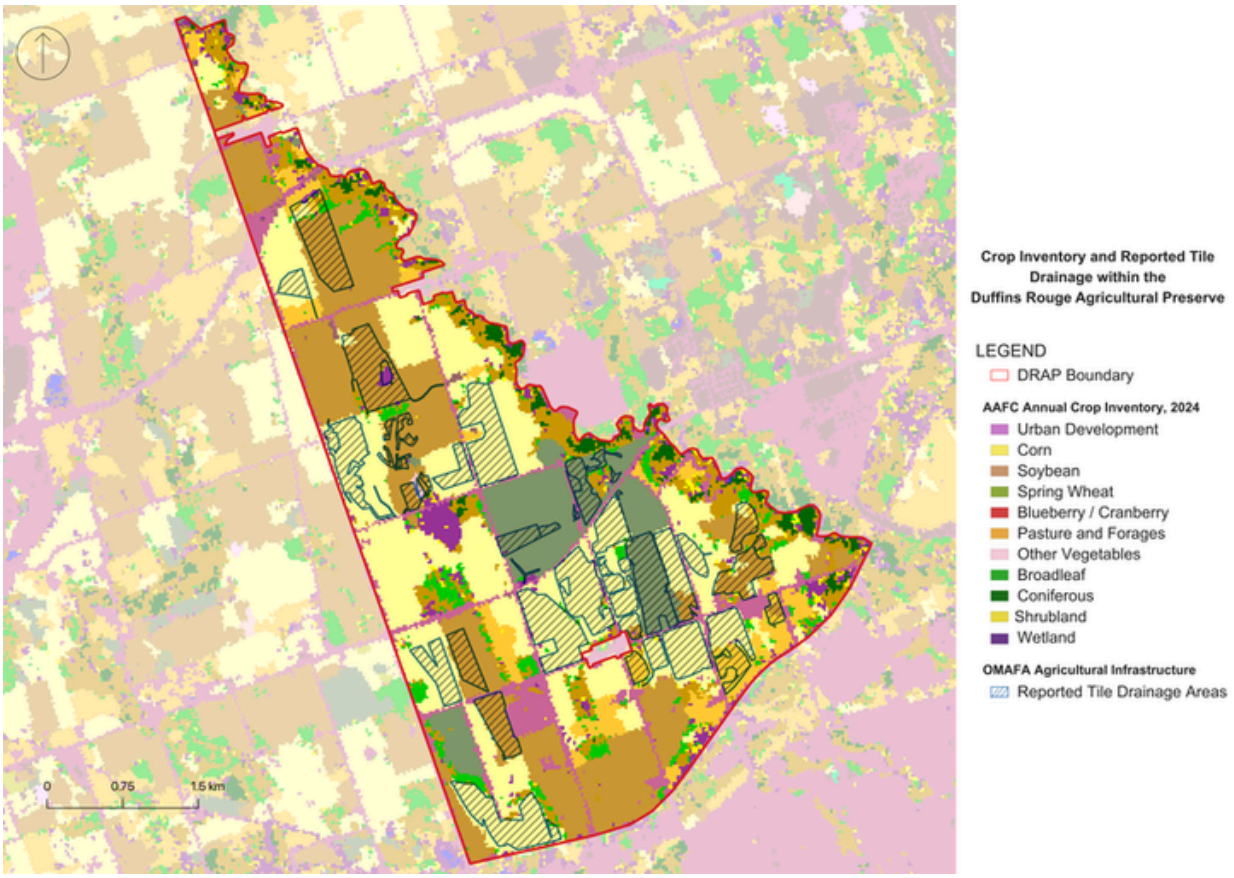


Figure 5: The map illustrates the spatial distribution of agricultural crops and other land-cover types within and surrounding the DRAP

Figure 5 should be understood as a snapshot of current production, not a prescription for future land use. It shows how the land is being actively used today, while the broader vision seeks to ensure that farmers have the conditions needed to continue, adapt, or diversify over time. Historically, agriculture in and around the DRAP included a wider range of activities, including livestock, dairy and beef operations, forage and pasture, mixed farming, and some fruit, vegetable, and direct-market production. A long-term vision for DRAP should not prescribe what individual farmers must grow. However, it should seek to create the conditions that allow agricultural operations to diversify where farmers determine that it is viable and appropriate for their businesses.

5.2 Environmental and Ecological Value

Beyond its agricultural productivity, the DRAP plays an important role within the broader environmental and ecological context of the Rouge and Duffins watersheds. As part of the Greenbelt, the DRAP contributes to the protection of natural systems, supports watershed health, and helps maintain continuity between agricultural and ecological functions.



Figure 6: *DRAP Boundary within the Regional Watershed and Subwatershed Context*

The importance of DRAP should not be understood as a choice between agriculture and the environment. In this landscape, agricultural land is part of the connective fabric that allows broader natural, watershed, and agricultural systems to function. Continued agricultural use can help maintain an open, permeable, and lower-intensity land use pattern when compared to urban development. Agricultural lands, integrated with natural features such as wetlands, woodlots, hedgerows, riparian areas, and grassed corridors, can support ecological connectivity, water movement, and habitat function. This is particularly important given the DRAP's location between Duffins Creek and Rouge National Urban Park and its relationship to broader Greenbelt and watershed systems.

A future vision for DRAP should therefore recognize opportunities to strengthen ecological function in ways that are compatible with agriculture. This could include protecting and enhancing riparian corridors, maintaining hedgerows and woodlots, supporting soil health, improving water management, encouraging compatible stewardship practices, and identifying areas where ecological restoration can occur without undermining the productive agricultural land base.

5.3 Strategic Location and Community Connection

Located at the urban edge of Pickering and within the broader context of planned growth in Durham Region, the DRAP sits at the interface between expanding communities and protected countryside. This position brings both opportunity and pressure. Surrounding growth increases the risk of land use conflict, infrastructure fragmentation, trespass, traffic impacts, and pressure for non-agricultural development. At the same time, proximity to nearby communities creates opportunities to strengthen public understanding of agriculture, improve access to local food where appropriate, and reinforce the role of protected farmland in regional planning.

The DRAP is also part of Durham Region's broader food system. While the Agricultural System refers primarily to the land use planning framework that supports the agricultural land base and agri-food network, the regional food system is broader. It includes food production, processing, distribution, food access, food literacy, community food security, environmental sustainability, and the partnerships and policies that shape how food is produced, accessed, and understood. The DRAP is not a food system on its own, but it is an important agricultural land base within that broader system.

Public engagement for this project showed interest in seeing DRAP become more visible and meaningful to nearby communities[55]. Respondents identified opportunities for farmgate sales, agricultural education, community connection, small-scale farming, food literacy, and support for new and young farmers. One respondent captured the broader opportunity by describing DRAP as having the potential to become "a beacon of opportunity for agriculture"[56] if permanent protection can be paired with long-term leases, farm business support, housing for farm workers and agriculture-related businesses, research and demonstration plots, agriculture education, and pathways for new farmers. This comment reflects a broader engagement theme: many participants see the DRAP not only as land to be protected, but as a place where agricultural opportunity, community connection, and food system education could be strengthened over time.

These aspirations should be understood as long-term opportunities rather than immediate prescriptions. Many of them would require changes to tenure, infrastructure, ownership conditions, zoning, partnerships, funding, and governance. However, they point to an important theme: protected farmland is more likely to be valued and defended over time when the public can understand, see, and experience its agricultural purpose.



5.4 Conditions for Agricultural Viability

Importantly, the value of the DRAP is closely tied to the agricultural community that operates within and around it. Current farmers and farm operators bring knowledge of the land, experience with local soil and drainage conditions, established equipment and labour systems, and relationships within the broader agricultural sector[57]. Their continued presence is essential to maintaining the DRAP as a working agricultural area.

At the same time, the long-term agricultural future of the DRAP is shaped not only by its land base and farm operators, but also by patterns of land ownership and investment. Where land is held with an expectation of future non-agricultural use, it can limit long-term planning, reduce incentives for agricultural investment, and create uncertainty for farm operations. Short-term or year-to-year lease arrangements can discourage investments in drainage, buildings, fencing, soil health, perennial crops, livestock infrastructure, direct-market enterprises, or other farm improvements that require a longer payback period[58].

This dynamic presents one of the central challenges facing the DRAP. The DRAP is protected for agriculture, but protection alone does not guarantee the conditions required for a vibrant agricultural future. These conditions can make it difficult for farmers to invest, speak publicly, diversify, or plan for succession. This is particularly important where agricultural operations depend on rented land owned by parties whose long-term objectives may not align with agricultural permanence.

The response should not be to direct farmers into particular crops or enterprises. Rather, the policy focus should be on changing the conditions that currently constrain agricultural investment and community connection. This includes longer and more secure agricultural leases, clearer permissions for agriculture-related and on-farm diversified uses, targeted infrastructure improvements, opportunities for new and young farmers, potential use of publicly controlled or utility corridor lands for compatible agriculture, and stronger partnerships with public agencies, agricultural organizations, conservation groups, and non-profit land trusts.

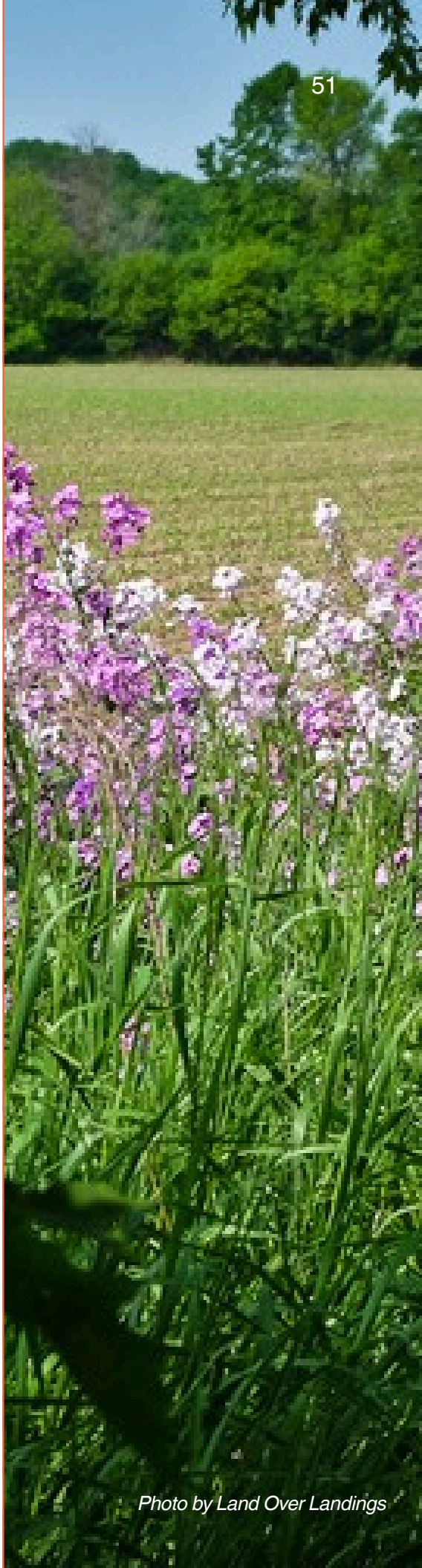


Photo by Land Over Landings

5.5 Provincial and National Importance

Taken together, these factors position the DRAP as a place of provincial and national importance. The argument is strongest when grounded in measurable characteristics: the DRAP's unique status as an agricultural preserve in Ontario; its location within the Greenbelt; its concentration of protected prime agricultural lands, including high-capability soils; its continued active farming under significant urban and development pressure; its role within Ontario's Agricultural System; its proximity to major urban markets; and its relationship to the Rouge River and Duffins Creek watersheds.

The provincial importance of the DRAP lies in what it demonstrates about farmland protection in Ontario. It is not only a protected agricultural landscape, but a test case for whether protected farmland at the urban edge can remain viable, actively farmed, and supported over time. Its future speaks to broader questions facing the province: how conservation easements and public policy can support active agriculture; how farmers can be given sufficient certainty to invest; how new and young farmers can access land; how infrastructure and land use planning can account for agricultural needs; and how communities can better understand and support the agricultural land base that sustains them.

The DRAP's importance also extends into a broader Canadian context. Prime agricultural lands are a limited non-renewable resource of national importance. The Canada Land Inventory classifies agricultural land according to capability, with Class 1 lands having the highest capability for agriculture. Nationally, prime agricultural lands make up only a small proportion of Canada's land mass, and Class 1 lands are particularly limited. Southern Ontario contains a significant concentration of this scarce resource, while also being one of the most heavily urbanized and growth-pressured parts of the country. Within this context, the DRAP forms part of a nationally significant agricultural land base that is both highly capable and highly vulnerable to competing land use pressures.

The combination of high-capability soils, favourable growing conditions, proximity to markets, and established agricultural infrastructure helps explain why farmland in this part of Ontario is so important. As discussed in Section 6.3 and illustrated in Figure 9, the DRAP contains a substantial concentration of high-capability agricultural soils, including Class 1 soils and other prime agricultural lands. Ontario farms produce more than 200 different agricultural commodities, reflecting the diversity of crops and farm products that can be supported by the province's soils, climate, growing season, and agri-food economy. This does not mean every commodity is suitable for the DRAP or that the DRAP should be directed toward any particular type of production. Rather, it reinforces the broader point that protecting high-quality farmland in southern Ontario preserves options for future agriculture.



Photo by Land Over Landings

This combination of attributes is not easily replicated elsewhere. Agriculture cannot simply be moved to another location, such as Northern Ontario, without consequence, because the productive capacity of farmland depends on the specific interaction of soil capability, climate, growing season, water availability, drainage, farm infrastructure, market access, and the surrounding agri-food network. Lands with lower soil capability, shorter growing seasons, weaker infrastructure, or greater distance from markets cannot necessarily support the same range of crops, farm businesses, or food system functions. The growing national attention to soil health, including federal work toward a National Agricultural Soil Health Strategy and Bill S-230, the proposed National Strategy for Soil Health Act, further reinforces that agricultural soils are a resource requiring active protection, conservation, and long-term stewardship.

Recognizing the provincial and national importance of the DRAP is therefore not only about defending the lands from development. It is about identifying what is required for a scarce, high-capability and non-renewable agricultural resource to remain active, productive, and resilient over time. The lessons from the DRAP can inform future agricultural preserves, conservation easement models, land access strategies, and farmland protection tools elsewhere in Ontario and across Canada.



Photo by Land Over Landings

6. What We Heard: Key Insights from Research and Engagement

6.1 Engagement Approach and Interpretation

The development of this vision has been informed by several streams of research and engagement, including policy review, agricultural and land use analysis, a public survey, a community workshop, direct outreach to residents within and near the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP), conversations with farmers and agricultural organizations, and correspondence received from landowners and landowner representatives[63]. These sources provided input from people and organizations with different perspectives and relationships to the DRAP, including farmers, residents, agricultural organizations, conservation interests, community members, public-sector representatives, and landowner interests.

The public survey was conducted between June 9 and September 1, 2025, and received 70 responses[64]. It was distributed through social media, email newsletters, door-to-door outreach, and QR code distribution. Respondents included residents within and near the DRAP, landowners, and members of the agricultural community. The survey results should be understood as an engagement tool rather than a statistically representative public opinion poll. They are useful for identifying recurring themes, concerns, aspirations, and areas of interest that emerged through the project.

As part of the DRAP Vision Project, a community workshop was held on September 15, 2025 at the Whitevale Community Centre. Participants were recruited through project outreach, including communications with residents, community contacts, agricultural and conservation stakeholders, and individuals who had engaged with the project through the survey, door-to-door outreach, or related communications. The workshop was designed as a facilitated, discussion-based session rather than a statistically representative consultation exercise. Participants worked in small groups to identify opportunities for agriculture in the DRAP, draft vision statements, identify conditions needed to support those opportunities, and consider practical pathways forward[65].

Door-to-door outreach was also conducted and provided additional insight into the perspectives of residents living within and near the DRAP. These conversations identified strong interest in the long-term protection of farmland, concern about development pressure, interest in local food and direct-sale farm products, appreciation for natural and ecological features, and a need for stronger public understanding of the DRAP's history, purpose, and agricultural function[66].

Input from farmers and agricultural stakeholders has been interpreted with particular care. The DRAP is a complex landscape with sensitive ownership, leasing, and working relationships. For that reason, farmer and agricultural

stakeholder input has been incorporated in an aggregated and non-attributable manner wherever possible. These perspectives are especially important because they speak to the practical realities of farming in the DRAP, including land access, lease arrangements, drainage, field entrances, equipment movement, infrastructure impacts, market conditions, farm investment, and the ability to make long-term business decisions. Their experience reinforces a central premise of this report: the future of the DRAP depends not only on whether the land remains protected, but on whether the conditions exist for viable, confident, and sustained agricultural activity.

Input from residents and community members helped identify broader public aspirations for DRAP, including interest in farmland protection, local food access, farmgate sales, agricultural education, ecological stewardship, support for new and young farmers, and stronger public understanding of the DRAP's purpose and identity. These aspirations are important, but they must be interpreted alongside the realities of private ownership, existing farm operations, land tenure, infrastructure requirements, and farmer-led business planning.

Landowner perspectives were also considered. Cherrywood Area Lands Management Inc. (CALMI) provided correspondence and supporting materials to the Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT) on behalf of landowners whose holdings comprise a significant proportion of the land within the DRAP. These materials were reviewed as part of the project and have helped inform the report's understanding of their positions, agricultural capability debates, ownership dynamics, and the implementation challenges associated with advancing a long-term agricultural vision in a privately owned and contested landscape.

The findings that follow do not represent a single consensus view. Rather, they summarize the major themes that emerged across research, policy review, public engagement, agricultural stakeholder conversations, resident outreach, workshop discussion, and landowner input. In some cases, the report translates broad public aspirations into more practical recommendations that reflect the current policy, ownership, and agricultural context. This approach is intended to ensure that the vision is not only ambitious, but also grounded in the conditions that would need to change for the DRAP to remain a permanently protected, actively farmed, and economically viable agricultural area.



6.2 Protection Is Strongly Supported, but Certainty Remains a Central Concern

Engagement undertaken through this project identified strong support for the long-term protection of the DRAP. Across the public survey, community workshop, door-to-door outreach, and conversations with agricultural stakeholders, maintaining the DRAP as a protected agricultural landscape emerged as a dominant recurring theme. This support was not universal across all perspectives received through the project; some landowner representatives expressed different views about the future of the lands.

> “It doesn't matter if it takes 20 years or 50 years to develop, we will wait it out.”
>
> - Landowner Respondent

However, among residents, community participants, and agricultural stakeholders engaged through the processes, there was clear and repeated interest in maintaining the DRAP as a protected agricultural landscape over the long term[67].

> The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve is irreplaceable- home to some of the best Class 1 farmland in Canada, vital for food security, climate resilience, and future generations. Protecting it is not just local, but national in importance. Thank you for your leadership and commitment to safeguarding this critical land.
>
> - Survey Respondent
>
> There’s so much opportunity for the DRAP to be a beacon of opportunity for agriculture when land is permanently protected. Unfortunately, the circumstances with the land ownership, pressures for development, and the actions of the government making the protections uncertain - creating insecurity for farmers to make long-term decisions - is negatively impacting its potential.
>
> - Survey Respondent

Door-to-door outreach reinforced this finding at the community level. Many residents expressed a clear desire to see the DRAP remain protected from development and maintained as farmland. Residents linked farmland protection to food production, community identity, rural character, ecological value, and concern about the pace of surrounding growth. Several residents also emphasized that the DRAP's value is not only agricultural, but also community-based: people live in and near the DRAP because of its protected agricultural landscape, its open character, and its connection to local history and natural features. These conversations showed that public confidence in the permanence of the DRAP cannot be taken for granted. For many residents, support for protection was closely connected to concern that protected lands could again become subject to political, development-related, or policy uncertainty.

> Where are we going to get our food if the farmland keeps getting developed?
>
> - DRAP resident
>
> The sprawl here is incredible and concerning, and we don't want to see any more of it.
>
> - DRAP resident
>
> There is a need ot increase the number of political champions who believe in the future of the DRAP. Some sense of agency and leadership must be instilled in them to build the importance and relevance of the preserve. Lean into the unique context and the history of community engagement to protect the area. It's a story of democracy and civic engagement, in addition to an agricultural opportunity.
>
> - Survey Respondent

At the same time, engagement also revealed that support for protection is closely tied to the concern about certainty. Participants frequently referred to the DRAP's history of expropriation, changing public policy direction, land ownership changes, and the 2022 removal and 2023 reinstatement of Greenbelt and DRAP Act protections. These events have contributed to a broader perception that even protected agricultural lands can remain vulnerable when legal and policy frameworks are not consistently upheld or actively implemented.

This concern was often expressed as an issue of public trust. Many residents and participants did not speak about protection only in legal or policy terms; they spoke about confidence, uncertainty, and whether governments and public institutions can be relied upon to uphold the long-term agricultural purpose of the DRAP. Some residents expressed concern that development interests have historically carried significant influence in land use decisions, while others described fatigue and unease after repeated debates over the future of the lands. These comments should be understood as perceptions expressed through engagement rather than findings about the conduct of any specific stakeholder. However, they are important because they point to a real implementation issue: if the public, farmers, and agricultural stakeholders do not have confidence that protections will be maintained and enforced over time, it becomes more difficult to support long-term agricultural investment, stewardship, and community trust in the DRAP's future.

The survey results reflect this distinction. A majority of respondents indicated that the DRAP has been successful in protecting agriculture within Durham Region. However, respondents were less confident that the DRAP has been successful in promoting agriculture within Durham Region. This distinction is important. It suggests that the DRAP is recognized as having performed an important protective function, but that protection alone has not been sufficient to create the conditions for a more visible, diversified, widely understood, and actively supported agricultural future.

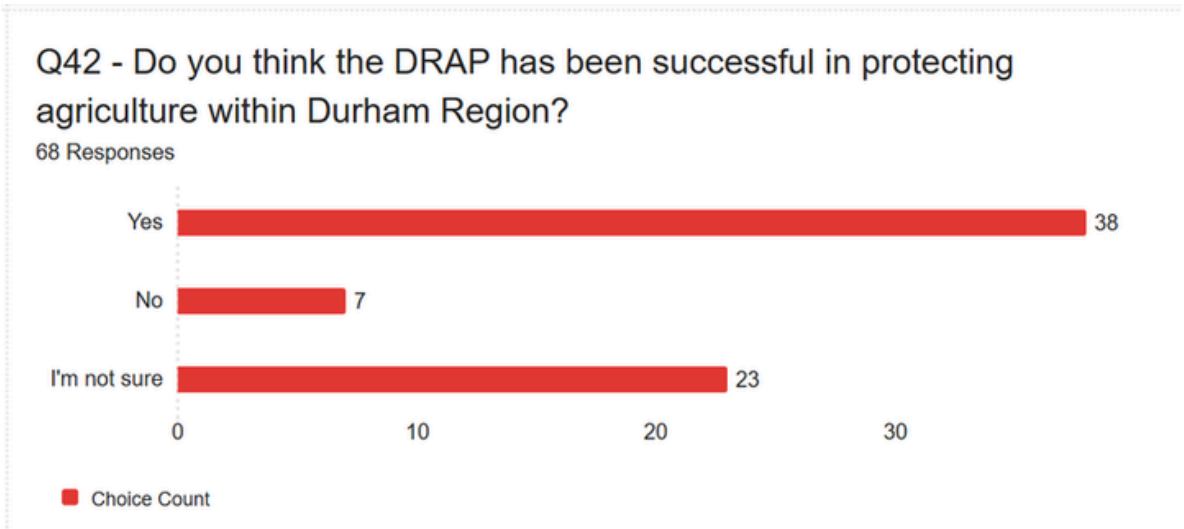


Figure 7: *Survey responses on whether the DRAP has been successful in protecting agriculture within Durham Region.*

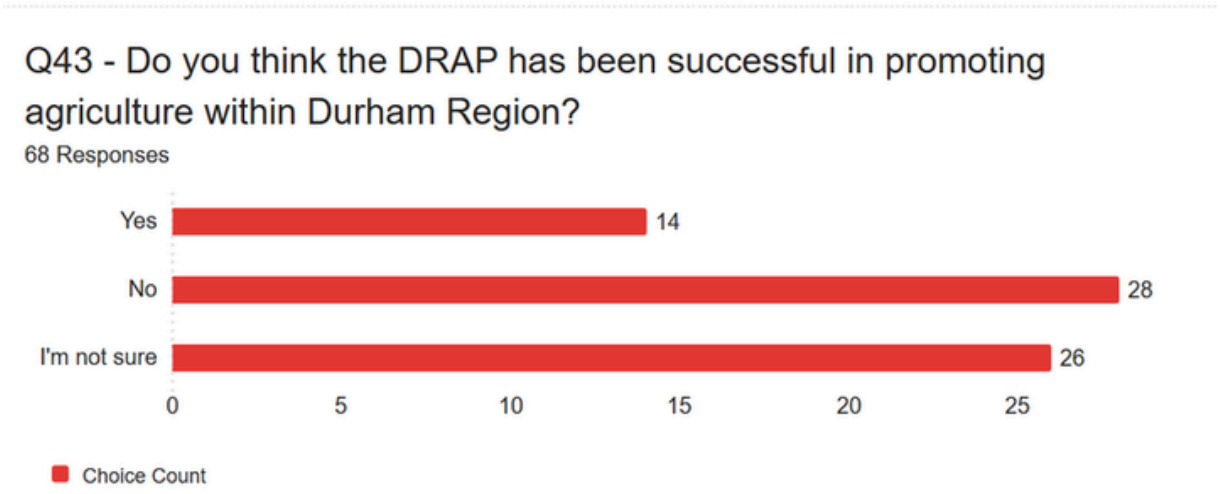


Figure 8: *Survey responses on whether the DRAP has been successful in promoting agriculture within Durham Region.*

Similarly, many workshop participants emphasized that long-term protection is a necessary foundation for any future vision for the DRAP. Participants identified the security of the land, the upholding of agricultural easements, and planning that considers farmland as key conditions for achieving a stronger agricultural future. In this sense, protection was not viewed as an endpoint. Rather, it was viewed as a prerequisite for agricultural investment, diversification, community connection, and long-term stewardship.

The existing protection framework has demonstrated real strength. Despite significant development pressure and a period of policy reversal, the DRAP remains protected and continues to be farmed. This is an important finding. More typical agricultural planning tools, such as a prime agricultural designation alone, may not have been sufficient to withstand this level of pressure. The DRAP's layered framework, including provincial policy, the Greenbelt Plan, the DRAP Act, municipal planning instruments, and agricultural easements, has played a critical role in maintaining the lands for agriculture.

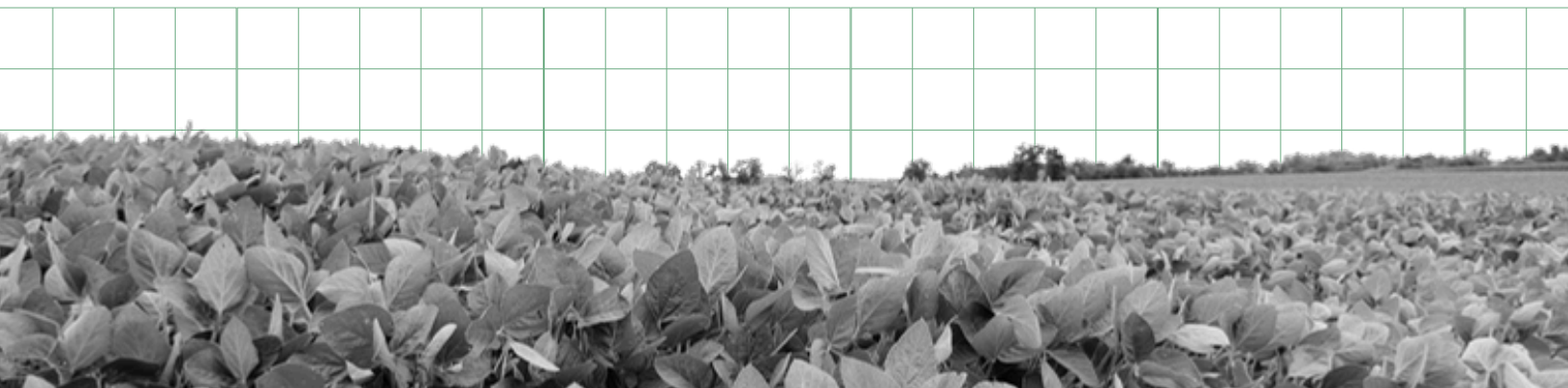
However, engagement also identified questions about whether the existing protection mechanisms are structured and administered in a way that fully supports long-term agricultural use, stewardship, and operational viability. The 2005 and 2022–2023 episodes of the easements being removed and reinstated showed that the durability of protection depends on governance and implementation, not only on the legal instruments themselves. Participants referenced these instances and raised questions about easement monitoring, the role of the easement holder, the relationship between political decision-making and long-term protection, and whether additional safeguards or complementary arrangements could improve confidence in the durability of the agricultural purpose of the lands.

Several residents and stakeholders suggested that easement security could be strengthened by reviewing whether the agricultural easements, currently held by the City of Pickering, should be transferred to, or co-held with, a qualified conservation organization or land trust. These suggestions should be understood as stakeholder perspectives requiring further legal, governance, and policy review. The broader insight is that permanent protection depends not only on the existence of easements and policy designations, but also on clear responsibility for monitoring, compliance, interpretation, stewardship, and implementation.

> Easements should be held by an organization who can be trusted to hold the easements (eg., OFT)
>
> - Survey Respondent

The key insight from engagement is therefore twofold. First, the DRAP's permanent protection remains strongly supported and has proven important. Second, long-term agricultural success will require greater certainty, clearer implementation responsibility, and stronger alignment between the protection framework and the practical conditions needed for active agriculture. The recommendations that follow respond to this finding by calling for stronger implementation of protection mechanisms, clearer easement monitoring and accountability, and a governance structure capable of maintaining confidence in the DRAP's agricultural future.

Long-term agricultural success depends on stability and certainty. While the DRAP's agricultural land base remains strong, the ability of farmers to plan and invest is closely tied to confidence that the lands will remain available for agriculture over the long term[68]. This need for certainty reflects the longer history of shifting expectations for these lands, including expropriation associated with the proposed Pickering Airport, decades of public ownership and planning uncertainty, the transfer of lands into private ownership subject to agricultural easements, and the more recent removal and reinstatement of Greenbelt and DRAP Act protections. These events reinforce the need for a protection framework that is not only legally durable, but actively monitored, consistently interpreted, and clearly implemented.



6.3 The Agricultural Land Base Is Highly Capable and Continues to Be Productively Farmed

The DRAP's agricultural value begins with the land itself. Soil mapping prepared for this project identifies the range of soil types found within the DRAP and the agricultural capability of much of the land base. Together, the following maps show both the physical diversity of the DRAP's soils and their strong suitability for agricultural production[69].

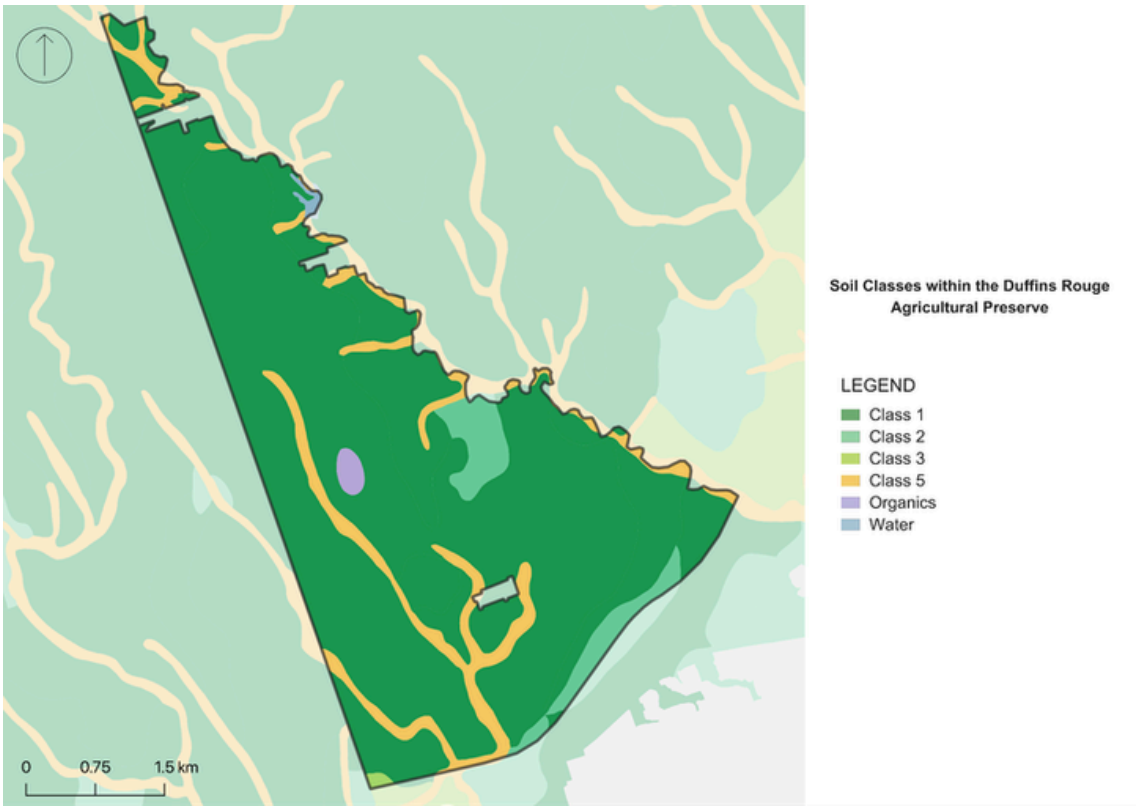


***Figure 9**: This map illustrates the distribution of Canada Land Inventory soil capability classes across the DRAP, highlighting the predominance of Class 1 agricultural soils.*

Figure 9 illustrates a significant concentration of prime agricultural land, with a substantial amount of soils identified as Class 1. The Canada Land Inventory classifies agricultural land according to its capability for agricultural production, with Class 1 lands having the highest capability and Class 2 and Class 3 lands also forming part of Ontario's prime agricultural land base. The concentration of high-capability soils within the DRAP reinforces its importance as a productive agricultural landscape and helps explain why its protection and continued active use are significant beyond the local context[70].

> The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve is irreplaceable- home to some of the best Class 1 farmland in Canada, vital for food security, climate resilience, and future generations. Protecting it is not just local, but national in importance. Thank you for your leadership and commitment to safeguarding this critical land.
>
> - Survey Respondent

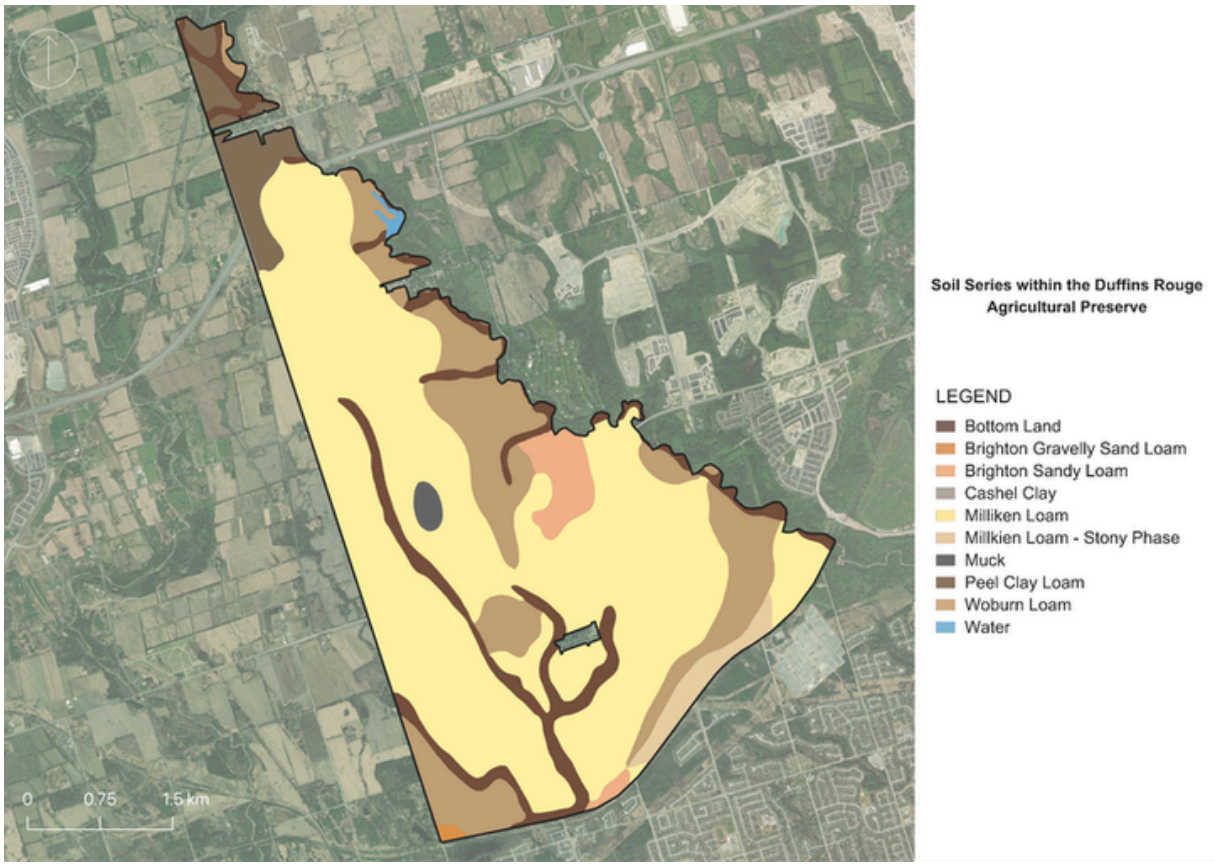


***Figure 10**: Soil types within the DRAP*

Soil type is important because different soils influence drainage, workability, crop suitability, erosion risk, and management decisions. Farmers operating within the DRAP bring practical knowledge of these local soil conditions, including how fields respond to weather, where drainage is most important, and how different areas can be managed productively over time. This local knowledge, demonstrated through engagement

with farmers within the DRAP, is part of the agricultural value of the DRAP and reinforces the importance of keeping experienced farmers actively connected to the land, while also supporting opportunities for new and emerging farmers to learn from that knowledge over time[71].

Soil capability, however, is only one part of the DRAP's agricultural value. High-quality soils provide the biophysical foundation for production, but long-term agricultural success also depends on climate, heat units, frost-free days, drainage, field configuration, access, infrastructure, farm management, tenure security, and the surrounding Agricultural System. Climate resources such as crop heat units and frost-free period influence crop suitability, variety selection, planting windows, and production potential, while reliable access to water is increasingly important for horticulture, diversified agriculture, livestock, and climate resilience[72]. The value of the DRAP therefore lies not only in the quality of its soils, but in the combination of soils, climate, water, and operating conditions that continue to support active farming within a protected agricultural landscape[73].

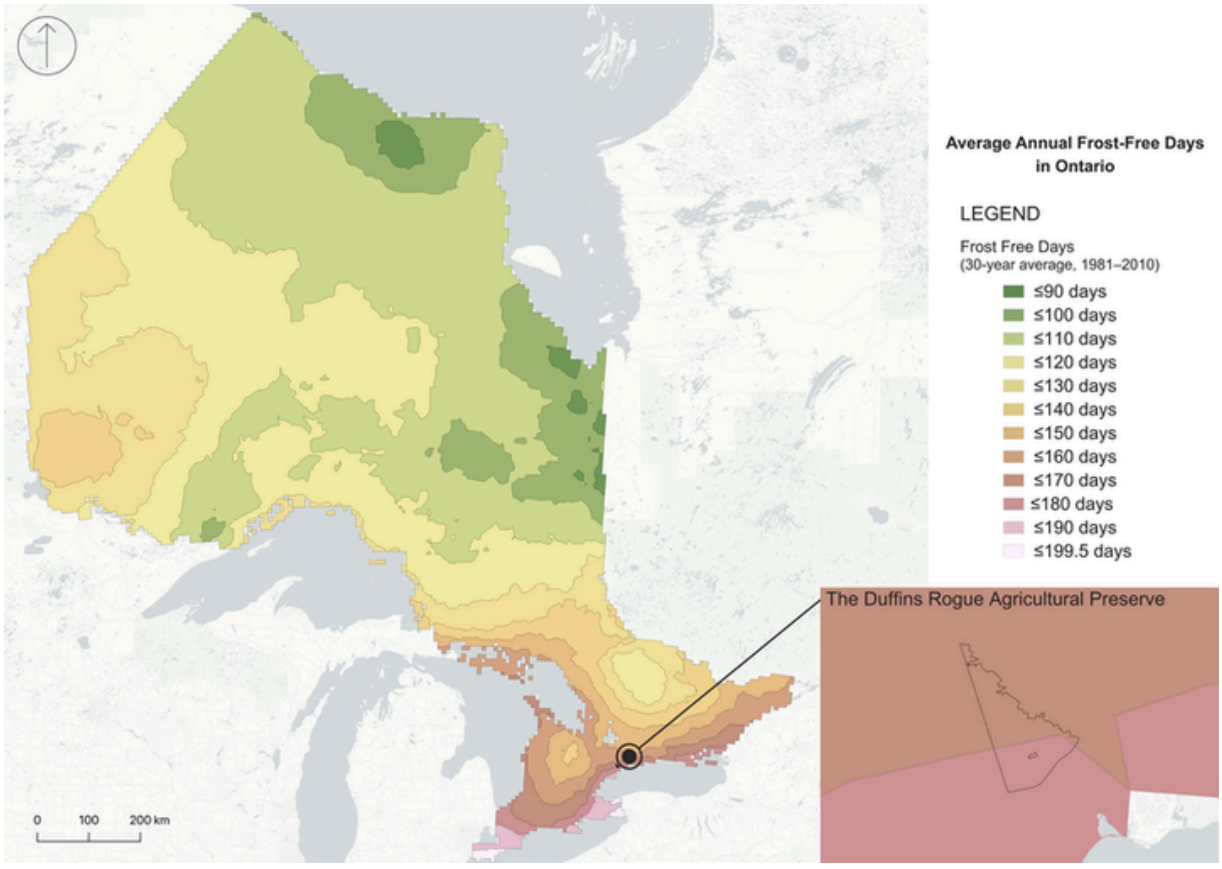


Figure 11: *This map illustrates the average annual number of frost-free days across Ontario from 1981 to 2010, highlighting the DRAP's location within the province's comparatively long growing-season region.*

Crop inventory mapping, shown in Figure 5 in Section 5.1, further confirms that the DRAP continues to function as a working agricultural area. Current production is largely centred on field crops, particularly corn, soybeans, and wheat, reflecting both broader patterns in Ontario agriculture and the specific operating conditions within the DRAP[74]. This production should not be dismissed as less valuable simply because it is less visible to nearby residents than farm markets, livestock, fruit, vegetables, or direct-market agriculture. Grains remain an important component of Ontario's agri-food economy: 72% of grains grown in Ontario remain in Ontario[75]. Local grain production also supports livestock feed, food-grade markets, seed, ethanol, export markets, and other supply chains.

The continuation of active agricultural production in the DRAP is also a reflection of the farmers who work the land. Input from farmers and agricultural stakeholders emphasized that productive farming in the DRAP depends on practical knowledge of local soils, drainage, field conditions, equipment needs, seasonal timing, and market realities. Farmers operating in and around the DRAP bring the equipment, labour, management skill, and agronomic knowledge required to keep the land productive. Their role should be understood not only in terms of agricultural output, but also in terms of stewardship: day-to-day farm management decisions influence soil health, water management, field productivity, and the long-term condition of the land[76].

Survey and engagement responses from farmer participants identified a range of beneficial management practices they apply, including practices such as cover crops, minimum or no-till, integration of organic material (manure), windbreaks, buffer strips, crop rotations, and soil testing. These practices should be understood within the broader context of modern Canadian agriculture, which is a technologically advanced and economically significant sector that continues to adopt practices, tools, and innovations aimed at improving productivity, sustainability, climate resilience, and food safety[77]. In the DRAP, this reinforces a broader finding from the project: active farmers are central to maintaining the productivity, land stewardship, and long-term agricultural function of the DRAP.

Engagement revealed that current field crop production is not always well understood by nearby residents and community members. Some residents expressed interest in seeing more visible forms of agriculture, such as farm markets, fruit and vegetable production, livestock, greenhouses, or direct-sale farm products. Door-to-door outreach also identified a need for greater agricultural education, particularly around larger-scale production and grain farming. These findings point to an important distinction: the current production profile may be less visible or less directly connected to nearby consumers than some other forms of agriculture, but it remains a productive and economically significant use of high-quality farmland. A long-term vision for the DRAP should therefore both recognize the value of current field crop production and create conditions for farmer-led diversification where farmers determine that it is viable and appropriate[78].

6.4 Tenure, Ownership, and Landowner Alignment Shape Agricultural Investment

Land tenure and access influence agricultural decision-making. Much of the agricultural land within the DRAP is farmed through lease arrangements, and these arrangements shape how farmers approach long-term planning, capital investment, and land stewardship. Tenure security should not be understood only as the length of a lease. It also depends on renewal expectations, landowner cooperation, permissions for agricultural improvements, and confidence that agriculture will remain the long-term priority for the land.

Where farmers have stable access to land and a constructive relationship with landowners, they are better positioned to invest in improvements that support productivity and stewardship. Conversely, where access to land is uncertain or short-term, it can limit the ability to pursue more diverse or longer-horizon agricultural activities, even where the land itself is well-suited to such uses. In addition, landowner perspectives and long-term intentions for the land can further influence agricultural decision-making. Where landowners may not prioritize agriculture as a long-term use, there may be less emphasis on supporting investments or improvements that would enable more diverse or sustained agricultural production.

Farmer and agricultural stakeholder input identified examples of investments and maintenance activities that support ongoing production, including drainage improvements, tile drainage, fencerow maintenance, field access, and the adaptation of fields for larger, modern farm equipment. These types of improvements can make existing farm operations more efficient and help maintain the land in active production.

However, different types of farm investment require different levels of tenure security, permission, and planning time horizons. More generally, annual field crop production can often continue under shorter or less certain arrangements, while more capital-intensive or long-horizon forms of agriculture may require greater confidence in land access and landowner support. Investments such as livestock facilities, fencing, barns or other farm buildings, perennial crops, irrigation, wash/pack facilities, direct-market infrastructure, or specialized production systems typically require longer payback periods and clearer permissions. Where lease terms, renewal expectations, or landowner intentions are uncertain, farmers may be less likely to pursue these forms of investment, even where the land itself is capable of supporting them.

This issue is not unique to the DRAP. It is a common challenge in near-urban agricultural areas where farmland may be owned by non-farm landowners, where development expectations have shaped ownership patterns, or where agricultural use is protected but long-term investment conditions remain uncertain. In the DRAP context, however, the issue is especially important because the DRAP is intended to function as a permanently protected agricultural landscape. If the land is protected for agriculture but farmers do not have the tenure

security, permissions, or landowner alignment needed to invest confidently, the DRAP may remain farmed but not achieve its full agricultural potential.

Landowners therefore play a critical role in the future of the DRAP. Their decisions affect lease terms, renewal expectations, access arrangements, maintenance, permissions for improvements, and whether farm operators can make decisions beyond the immediate season. Aligning landowner decision-making with the agricultural purpose of the DRAP will be essential to supporting current farmers, enabling future farmer pathways, and creating conditions for greater agricultural diversity where farmers choose to pursue it.

The key insight is that tenure security is not simply a private lease issue; it is a structural condition affecting the long-term agricultural function of the DRAP. Improving tenure security and landowner alignment does not mean prescribing ownership outcomes or directing farmers into particular forms of production. Rather, it means creating conditions where farmers can operate with confidence, make appropriate investments, maintain the land productively, and adapt their farm businesses over time.

6.5 Farming in the DRAP Faces Near-Urban Pressures and Infrastructure Impacts

Farming in the DRAP takes place within a complex near-urban context. The DRAP is located at the edge of planned and expanding urban areas, near major transportation corridors, servicing infrastructure, utility corridors, settlement areas, and public lands. This location creates opportunities for market access, public awareness, and local food connections, but it also creates practical pressures for farm operations. Farmers must navigate traffic, road changes, field access constraints, drainage issues, land use conflicts, trespass concerns, infrastructure projects, and the logistical challenges of operating within a landscape that is increasingly shaped by surrounding urban growth.

Infrastructure and servicing projects are not inherently incompatible with the Greenbelt or with protected agricultural landscapes. Roads, utilities, servicing, transit, drainage works, and other infrastructure may be required to serve existing communities, surrounding growth areas, or broader public needs[79]. However, infrastructure that is planned without sufficient attention to agriculture can have significant consequences for active farming. Within and around the DRAP, farmers and agricultural stakeholders identified concerns about how road improvements, servicing installations, utility corridors, and related works can affect field configuration, drainage patterns, soil conditions, field entrances, construction timing, equipment movement, and overall farm efficiency. These impacts should be assessed not only in terms of land use conformity, but also in terms of how infrastructure affects the practical ability to farm.

Infrastructure investment can also create longer-term land use pressure. Where major servicing, transportation, or utility investments are made near agricultural land, there can be pressure to "realize" that investment through more intensive non-agricultural development. In the DRAP context, this logic must be carefully balanced against the permanent agricultural purpose of the DRAP and the public value of high-capability farmland. Agricultural land should not be treated as underdeveloped land waiting for urban servicing; it is a productive resource within the Agricultural System. Infrastructure in and around the DRAP should therefore be planned to support agriculture as well as surrounding communities. This includes considering the infrastructure farmers need to operate effectively, such as drainage systems, safe roads, equipment movement routes, field entrances, transportation access, water access where appropriate, hydro capacity, and other services that support viable agricultural operations.

Infrastructure impacts can be highly practical. Road widenings, roundabouts, traffic signals, guardrails, signage placement, road shoulders, roadside trees and brush, ditch cleanouts, culvert work, and temporary road closures can all influence whether farm equipment can move safely and efficiently between fields. Conversely, well-designed infrastructure can help support farm operations by maintaining field entrances, drainage outlets, adequate shoulders, safe turning movements, sightlines, and appropriate routes for large equipment. Similarly, servicing installations or utility works can affect tile drainage, field access, soil compaction, and the ability to maintain workable field areas. Even where the footprint of a project is relatively small, the operational effects can be significant if the project changes how farmers access, drain, cultivate, or move between fields[81].

Engagement also pointed to the importance of early and practical communication between farmers and local government or infrastructure staff. Infrastructure impacts are often more manageable when affected farm operators are consulted early, when field entrances and access routes are understood before design decisions are finalized, and when construction timing is coordinated with seasonal farm activities. A farm access and operations plan, prepared before roadwork, ditch maintenance, utility work, or construction begins, could help identify equipment routes, turning movements, drainage outlets, temporary access needs, and timing constraints. This kind of coordination would help avoid situations where infrastructure projects unintentionally create long-term operational challenges for farmers[82].

Near-urban farming also involves broader cost and operational pressures. Farmers operating in and around the DRAP may face higher land costs, greater traffic volumes, more land use conflicts, increased scrutiny from nearby residents, and higher costs associated with fragmented access or longer travel distances to services. These pressures can influence farm profitability and may affect decisions about whether to invest, diversify, expand, or simplify operations. In this context, the current concentration of field crop production should be understood not only as a market choice, but also as a response to tenure, infrastructure, logistics, and operating conditions that may make more labour-intensive, infrastructure-dependent, or public-facing forms of agriculture more difficult to pursue[83].

Farmers also identified illegal dumping along roadsides, field edges, and farm properties as a growing concern within and around the DRAP. In some cases, this issue was described as a more frequent and

and costly problem than trespassing. Illegal dumping can create cleanup costs, interfere with field access and roadside maintenance, affect drainage or equipment movement, and contribute to a broader sense that working farmland is not being properly respected. This issue reflects the challenges of farming in a near-urban context, where public access, traffic, and proximity to urban populations can create pressures that are not always captured through land use policy alone.

The DRAP's geography matters. While the DRAP remains part of a broader Agricultural System, it can function in some respects as an agricultural peninsula: protected farmland surrounded or constrained by urbanizing areas, major infrastructure, public lands, and changing land use expectations. This can make farming feel more isolated than in larger, more continuous agricultural landscapes and can increase the importance of maintaining connections to surrounding farmland, agricultural services, transportation routes, drainage systems, and farm support businesses. Future agricultural preserves or protected agricultural areas should avoid becoming isolated from the broader Agricultural System wherever possible.

The key insight is that protected farmland can still be weakened by incremental infrastructure and land use decisions if those decisions do not account for the practical needs of farming. For the DRAP to remain viable, infrastructure and servicing decisions should be assessed not only for land use conformity, but also for their effects on agricultural operations. This includes applying an agricultural impact lens from the earliest stages of planning, avoiding impacts where possible, minimizing impacts where they cannot be avoided, and mitigating impacts where they occur.



6.6 Agricultural Activity Remains Strong, but Diversity Has Narrowed

Current agricultural production within the DRAP is largely centered on established field crop rotations, particularly corn, soybeans, and wheat, as seen in Figure 5 in Section 5.1. This production remains an important and legitimate agricultural use of the land. It demonstrates that the DRAP continues to function as an active working agricultural landscape and contributes to Ontario's broader agri-food economy.

Research and engagement undertaken through this project indicates a reduction in the diversity of farming operations over time. Historically, agriculture in the area included a broader mix of farm types and production systems, including mixed farming, dairy, beef, and fruit and vegetable production. The current concentration of field crop production reflects broader trends in Ontario agriculture, including specialization, farm consolidation, and economies of scale. In the DRAP context, it also reflects local conditions, including land tenure, ownership patterns, infrastructure needs, uncertainty, and the decline or relocation of nearby agricultural support services[84].

The shift toward annual field crop production should also be understood in relation to tenure, infrastructure, and long-term certainty. Historically, mixed farming, dairy, beef, forage, pasture, and other livestock-related operations required barns, fencing, water systems, manure management, feed storage, laneways, and other forms of long-term farm infrastructure. Perennial crops and some horticultural systems also require longer planning horizons and delayed returns on investment. By comparison, annual crops such as corn, soybeans, and wheat can often be managed with fewer fixed on-site investments and shorter production cycles. In a landscape shaped by expropriation, changing ownership, leased land, development uncertainty, and shifting policy direction, it is understandable that production has tended toward forms of agriculture that are more adaptable to uncertain tenure and infrastructure conditions[85].

Agricultural stakeholder input indicated interest in seeing livestock, perennial crops, or other diversified agricultural activities return to the DRAP where conditions allow. However, these forms of agriculture generally require greater certainty, landowner support, infrastructure investment, and long-term access to land. This reinforces the importance of addressing tenure security, landowner alignment, infrastructure permissions, and farm business viability before assuming that greater diversification can occur.

Engagement through this project also identified interest in creating opportunities for new and beginning farmers within the DRAP. Workshop participants identified diversification as a leading opportunity for agriculture in the DRAP, including interest in livestock, fruit and vegetable production, small-scale agriculture, organic and regenerative production, agri-tourism, local marketing, and diversified agricultural business models. These ideas were closely connected to other conditions raised through the workshop, including longer-term farm security, policy review, political will, and stronger planning attention to agriculture[86].

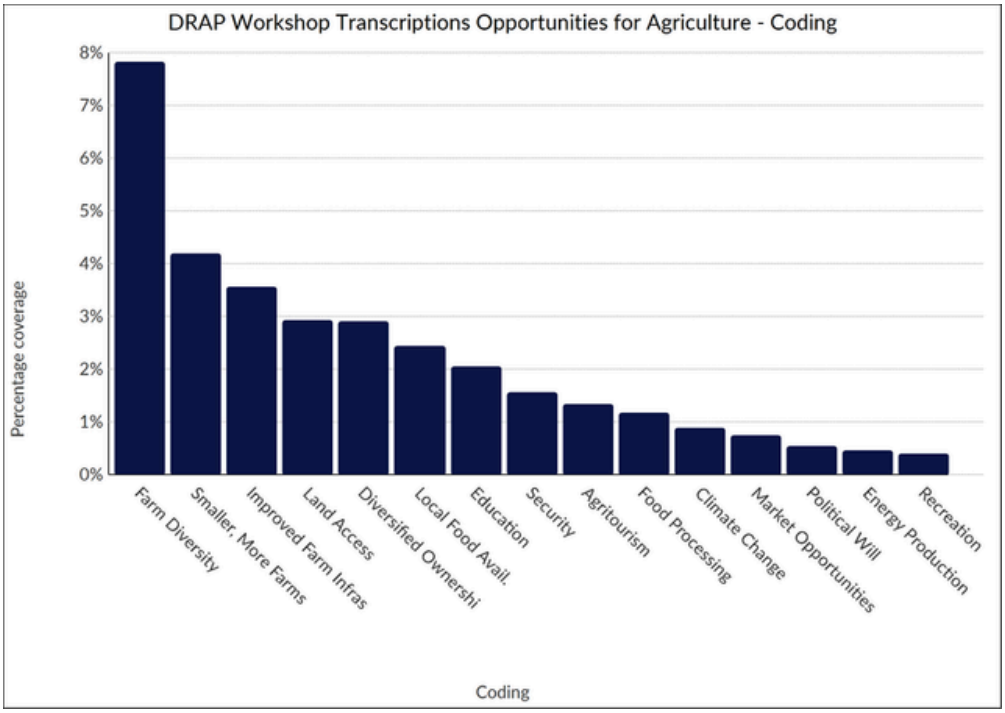


Figure 12: *Coded transcriptions from Activity 1 of the DRAP Community Workshop, displaying opportunities for agriculture within the DRAP*

Survey respondents were also asked what types of diversified agricultural operations they would like to see encouraged within the DRAP. Responses included a range of production types, direct-market opportunities, and agriculture-related enterprises. These responses should be understood as illustrative examples of community interest, not as a prescription for what farmers should grow or how individual farm businesses should operate[88].

Roadside Market	Greenhouse for year round fruit/ vegetable production
Dairy	Maple syrup
Fruits	Whatever is suitable for both farmer and farm
Grazing/ Meat	Honey
Bok Choy or Asian-relevant vegetables	Distillery or Brewery
Root vegetables	Direct-sale fruit and vegetable

> All types of agriculture and farming are promoted and encouraged. Encouraging more diversity in the types of agriculture without discrimination or being too prescriptive - allow farmers the flexibility to produce what they are passionate about and where new market opportunities emerge for them.
>
> - Survey Respondent

Importantly, these examples point to community aspirations and perceived opportunities. Implementation would depend on farmer interest, land suitability, tenure, infrastructure, market conditions, landowner support, and compatibility with existing farm operations and economic viability.

Interest in diversification was also reflected in resident and community engagement. Some residents expressed interest in seeing more visible forms of agriculture, including farm markets, fruit and vegetable production, livestock, greenhouses, market gardens, and direct-sale farm products. These comments suggest that some community members associate agricultural diversity with local food access, public connection, and a stronger visible relationship between the DRAP and nearby communities[89].

A long-term vision for the DRAP should therefore support agricultural diversity as an opportunity, not a prescription. The report should not direct farmers away from current field crop production or prescribe what individual farm businesses should grow. Instead, it should identify the conditions that would allow farmers to diversify where they determine it is viable and appropriate. This includes protecting existing viable farm operations, improving tenure and landowner alignment, addressing infrastructure and servicing constraints, ensuring supportive planning permissions, and exploring opportunities for new and beginning farmers on smaller, irregular, edge, utility corridor, or otherwise underutilized lands where this can occur without displacing current farm operations.

The key insight is that agricultural activity in the DRAP remains strong, but future resilience may be enhanced by creating more options for farmers over time. Supporting farmer-led diversification, new farmer pathways, and complementary agricultural uses can help broaden the agricultural future of the DRAP while respecting the productivity and importance of the farming that is already taking place.

6.7 There Is Interest in Local Food, Direct-Market Opportunities, and Stronger Community Connection

As discussed in Section 6.2, survey respondents generally viewed the DRAP as more successful in protecting agriculture than in actively promoting agriculture within Durham Region. This distinction helps explain why many participants identified local food, direct-market opportunities, agricultural education, and stronger community connection as areas where the DRAP could play a more visible role[90].

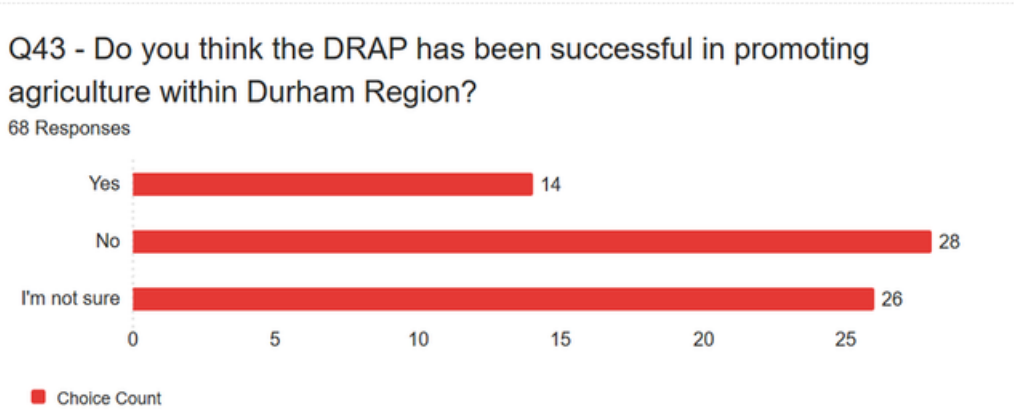


Figure 13: *Survey responses on whether the DRAP has been successful in promoting agriculture within Durham Region.*

Survey results suggest that many respondents see an opportunity to strengthen the DRAP's contribution to the surrounding community and regional agri-food system. A strong majority of respondents who answered this question indicated that there are opportunities to improve the way the DRAP contributes to, and functions within, the community and agri-food system in the region. At the same time, responses also showed uncertainty about how the DRAP currently connects to local food access. Some respondents indicated that they purchase food produced in the DRAP, while others were unsure or said they did not. Written responses suggest that this uncertainty is partly due to limited visibility, branding, signage, or direct-market opportunities associated with food produced in the DRAP[91].

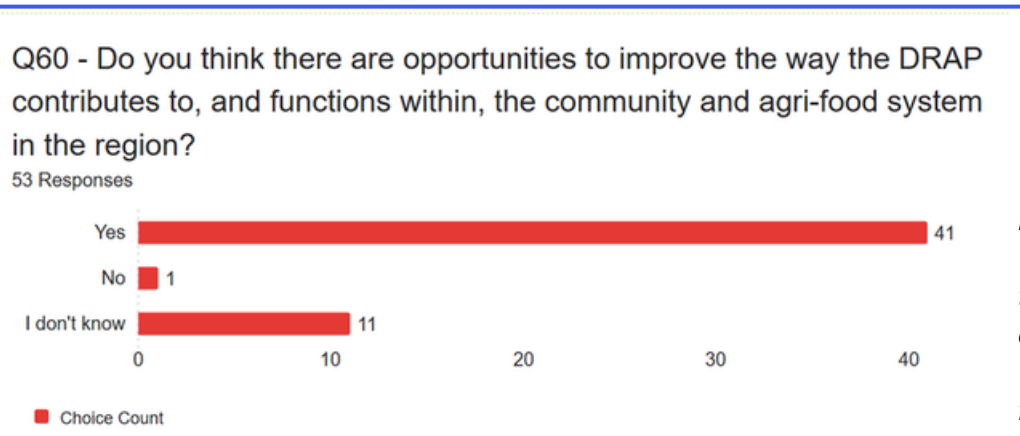


Figure 14: *Survey responses on whether there are opportunities to improve the way the DRAP contributes to, and functions within, the community and agri-food system in the region*

Residents and community participants expressed interest in seeing more opportunities to purchase fresh, locally produced agricultural products directly from farms in or near the DRAP. Some referenced past experiences with farm markets and identified a desire for farmgate sales, farm stores, pick-your-own opportunities, community-supported agriculture, local distribution, or other forms of direct connection between farmers and nearby residents. These interests were also reflected in open-ended survey responses that identified opportunities such as farm markets, direct-to-consumer sales, CSAs, farm tours, agricultural events, and stronger public education[92].

> Workshop participants expressed a similar aspiration. One participant summarized the opportunity as:
>
> "A place to bring the farm to the people and the people to the farm"[93]

This statement captures an important theme: many residents and community participants are not only interested in protecting farmland as open space or scenery; they are interested in understanding, accessing, and building a stronger relationship with the agricultural activity taking place there.

Q12 - How could the DRAP better support the agri-food system in the region?

47 Responses

Field	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance	Responses	Sum
Increase farmer-ownership of the land	1.00	6.00	2.06	1.60	2.57	47	97.00
Encourage more agritourism (farm stores, farm tours etc.)	1.00	6.00	2.83	1.33	1.76	47	133.00
Encourage more recreational opportunities in the preserve	1.00	7.00	4.57	1.45	2.12	47	215.00
Encourage a wider variety of agricultural operations (fruits, grains, vegetables, meat etc.)	1.00	7.00	3.43	1.27	1.61	47	161.00
Encourage agricultural education and training	1.00	6.00	4.40	1.27	1.60	47	207.00
Supporting farmland access for new and young farmers	1.00	6.00	3.89	1.92	3.67	47	183.00
Other	1.00	7.00	6.81	0.91	0.84	47	320.00

Figure 15: *Survey responses on how the DRAP could better support the regional agri-food system*

Figure 14 shows that, after farmer ownership, respondents ranked agri-tourism opportunities such as farm stores or farm tours and a wider variety of agricultural operations among the highest priorities for how the DRAP could better support the regional agri-food system[94]. These responses align with other engagement findings that identified interest in fruit and vegetable production, livestock-related opportunities, farm markets, food literacy, agricultural education, and pathways for new and young farmers.

These interests should be interpreted as opportunities rather than prescriptions. The DRAP is not a food system on its own, and not all production within the DRAP needs to be local, direct-market, or public-facing. Field crop production remains a legitimate and important contribution to Ontario's agri-food economy. Similarly, not every farmer will want to operate a farm store, host tours, sell directly to the public, or shift into more labour-intensive forms of production. Local food and direct-market opportunities should therefore be supported only where they are farmer-led, economically viable, compatible with existing farm operations, and consistent with the agricultural purpose of the DRAP.

The key insight is that stronger local food and community connections could help increase the public value, visibility, and understanding of the DRAP, while also creating potential economic opportunities for interested farmers. To achieve this, the focus should be on enabling conditions: secure tenure, landowner support, appropriate zoning and easement interpretation, safe access, signage, marketing support, shared infrastructure, and partnerships with Durham Region's food system, agricultural economic development, and community food organizations.

6.8 Awareness, Identity, and Understanding of DRAP Remain Limited

Engagement efforts revealed that awareness of the DRAP is uneven. Many survey respondents indicated that they were personally familiar with the DRAP, but also reported that the DRAP and its history are poorly understood by the broader public. This distinction is important. Those who are already connected to the project, live in or near the DRAP, or follow farmland protection issues may understand DRAP's purpose, but that awareness does not necessarily extend to the wider Pickering, Durham Region, or Greater Toronto Area public[95].

Door-to-door outreach reinforced this finding. Some residents were familiar with the DRAP and its history, while others had limited awareness of the DRAP, its boundaries, or the policies that guide land use in the area. In at least one case, a resident did not know they lived within the DRAP. These conversations suggest that DRAP's protected status, agricultural purpose, and public significance are not always visible or easily understood, even by people living in close proximity to the lands[96].

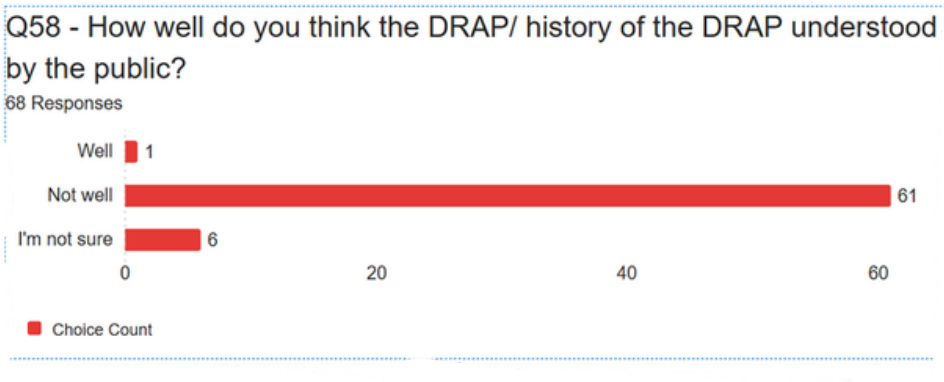


Figure 16: *Survey responses on familiarity with the DRAP and perceived public understanding of its history*

There is also a broader need to communicate the history and purpose of the DRAP in a clear and accessible way. Public understanding of DRAP requires more than knowing that the land is protected. It also requires understanding the history of land assembly and expropriation associated with the proposed Pickering Airport, the return of lands to private ownership subject to agricultural easements, the relationship between DRAP and the Greenbelt, the 2022 removal and 2023 reinstatement of protections, and the difference between DRAP, Rouge National Urban Park, the Federal Pickering Lands, and surrounding agricultural areas. Without this context, the DRAP may be misunderstood as vacant land, future development land, parkland, or open countryside rather than as a working agricultural landscape with a specific legal and policy history.

Current agricultural activity within the DRAP is also not always visible or well understood. Door-to-door outreach identified a need for greater agricultural education, particularly around larger-scale production and grain farming. Some residents expressed interest in more visible forms of agriculture, such as farm markets, local food sales, market gardens, livestock, or greenhouses. These interests are important, but they should be paired with education that explains the value of existing field crop production, the role of grains in Ontario's agri-food economy, and the practical realities of farming in a near-urban, largely privately owned agricultural landscape.

Improved signage was one of the clearest opportunities identified through the project. The project team observed that existing signage is limited, small, and not consistently present at all key entry points. The current signs provide little explanation of what the DRAP is, why it is protected, or how it relates to the surrounding agricultural, ecological, and Greenbelt landscape. Survey responses supported this observation: most respondents indicated that signage was not sufficient to let people know they had entered an agricultural preserve, while many others were unsure. Only a small proportion of respondents viewed the existing signage as sufficient.



Figure 17: *Existing DRAP entrance signage viewed from the roadway*



Figure 18*: Existing DRAP entrance signage, zoomed in view*

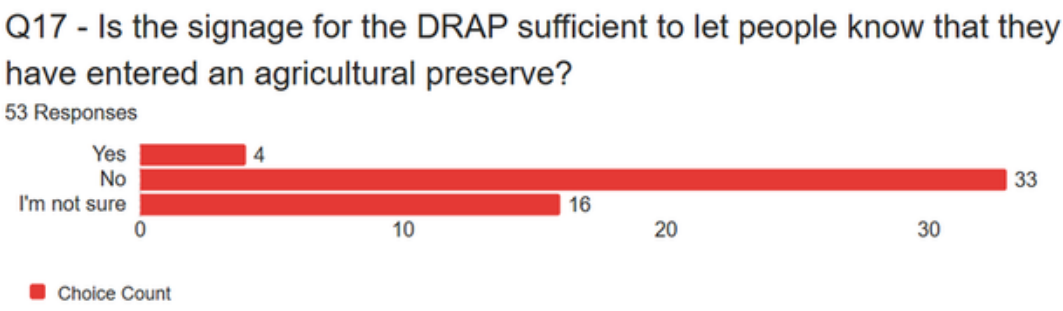


***Figure 19**: Survey responses on whether current signage adequately identifies the DRAP*

Survey respondents also identified themes they would like to see reflected in future signage and interpretation, with farmland protection ranking highly among suggested signage themes. Signage could help communicate that DRAP is a permanently protected agricultural preserve, a working farm landscape, part of Ontario's Greenbelt, and an important component of Pickering and Durham Region's agricultural history. It could also help distinguish DRAP from nearby Rouge National Urban Park while explaining the relationship between agriculture, watershed health, ecological connectivity, and public benefit.

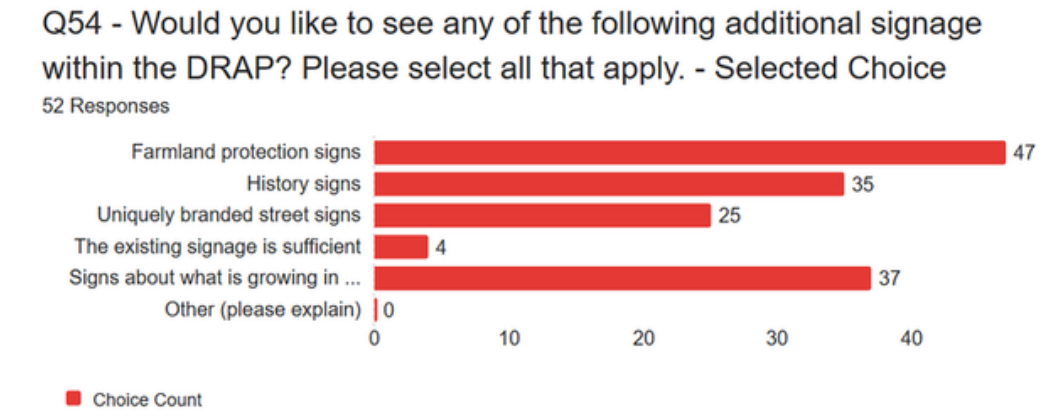


***Figure 20:** Survey responses on preferred signage and interpretation themes*

Future signage and education should be designed carefully. The goal should not be to convert the DRAP into a recreational destination or encourage unmanaged public access onto private farmland. Rather, public communication should help residents, visitors, decision-makers, and nearby communities understand that DRAP is a working agricultural area. This includes explaining normal farm practices, seasonal farm activity, farm equipment movement, private property, the importance of respecting farm operations, and the role of farmers as both agricultural producers and land stewards.

There is an opportunity to strengthen DRAP's identity through a coordinated public awareness strategy. This could include gateway signs at key entrances, interpretive signs on public rights-of-way or appropriate public lands, a public-facing webpage or digital story map, school and community education materials, workshops or webinars, and communication materials for nearby residents. These tools would help explain DRAP's agricultural purpose, history, easements, Greenbelt significance, ecological connections, and role within Durham's Regional Food System[98].

The key insight is that stronger public awareness can support long-term protection and agricultural viability. When the public understands why the DRAP exists, how it is farmed, how it differs from a park, and why protected farmland matters, there is a stronger foundation for respectful behaviour, political support, community connection, and long-term stewardship. This includes helping the public understand that the DRAP is not simply open land at the urban edge, but part of an irreplaceable, high-capability agricultural land base with provincial and national importance. Public awareness should therefore be understood not as a secondary communications issue, but as part of the implementation framework needed to sustain the DRAP over time.

6.9 The Broader Agricultural Support Network Has Declined

The DRAP cannot be understood only as a protected land base. Its long-term agricultural viability depends on the broader Agricultural System that supports farming across the surrounding landscape. In provincial planning terms, this includes not only the agricultural land base, but also the agri-food network: the infrastructure, services, markets, transportation routes, processing capacity, input suppliers, farm businesses, and agriculture-supportive communities that allow farming to function effectively[99].

Engagement and research undertaken through this project identified concern about the reduced presence, relocation, or increasing distance of agricultural support services in and around the near-urban agricultural landscape. This includes services and infrastructure such as equipment dealers and repair, feed mills, input suppliers, abattoirs, veterinary services, custom operators, storage, processing, transportation, and distribution. This should not be understood as a condition unique to the DRAP alone. Rather, it reflects a broader challenge in peri-urban agricultural areas, where urban expansion, farmland fragmentation, rising land values, declining agricultural critical mass, and land use uncertainty can make it more difficult to retain the services and businesses that support farming[100].

These services matter because farming depends on more than land. Agricultural support services help farmers access inputs, repair equipment, move products, manage livestock, store crops, process food, respond to market opportunities, and operate efficiently. When these services become more distant or less available, farming can become more costly, less flexible, and more difficult to diversify. This is especially important for forms of agriculture that require more specialized infrastructure or service relationships, such as livestock, horticulture, direct-market production, aggregation, cold storage, processing, or local distribution.

The decline or relocation of agricultural support services also interacts with other themes identified in this report. Tenure uncertainty, landowner alignment, infrastructure constraints, and a narrower production profile can all reduce incentives for reinvestment in the surrounding agricultural network. At the same time, the continued presence of active farming within the DRAP helps sustain demand for agricultural services beyond the DRAP's boundaries. In this way, the relationship is reciprocal: DRAP farmers rely on the broader agricultural support network, while the continued active use of DRAP farmland contributes to the viability of that network.

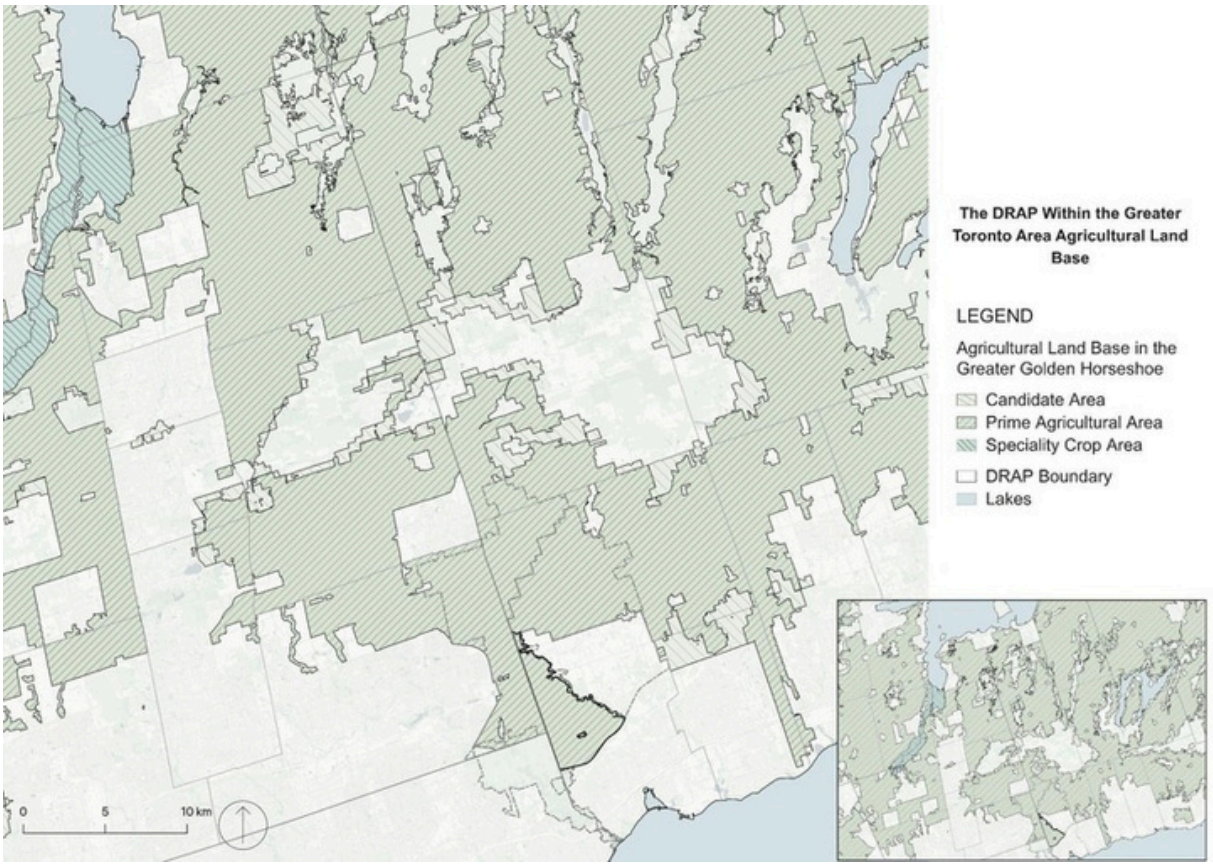


***Figure 21**: DRAP within the broader Greater Toronto Area agricultural land base, illustrating its relationship to designated prime agricultural areas, candidate areas, and specialty crop areas.*

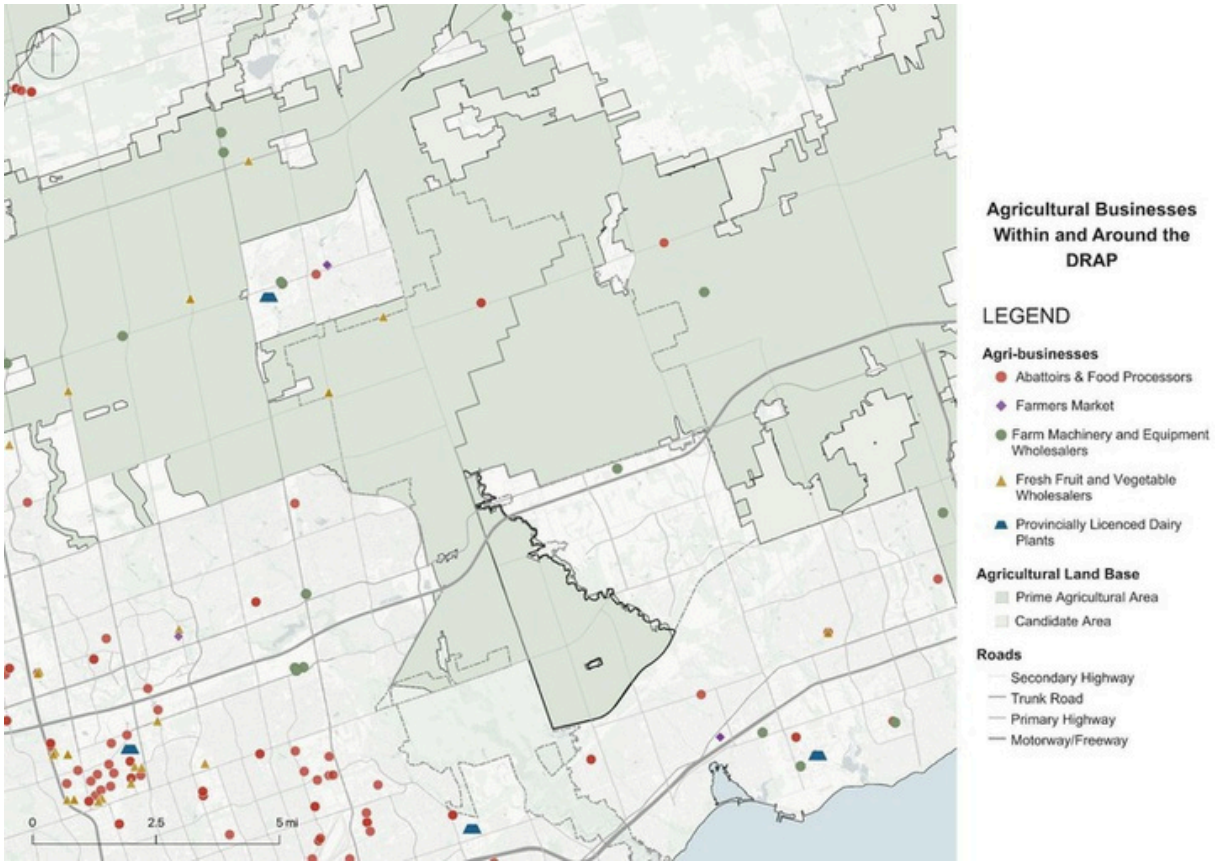


Figure 22: *The DRAP in relation to the broader agricultural land base and the distribution of nearby agri-businesses, including food processors, farmers' markets, equipment wholesalers, produce wholesalers, and provincially licensed dairy plants.*

This finding reinforces the importance of treating the DRAP as part of a larger Agricultural System rather than as a stand-alone protected area. As part of implementation, this work should be expanded into a more detailed and regularly updated mapping and gap-analysis tool that identifies agricultural services, infrastructure, transportation routes, markets, farm businesses, and processing or distribution capacity serving the DRAP and surrounding agricultural lands. This would help identify where targeted partnerships, economic development efforts, shared infrastructure, or regional planning support could strengthen the conditions needed for farming to remain viable over time.

The key insight is that permanent protection of the land base is necessary, but not sufficient. If the agricultural support network continues to weaken, the DRAP may remain protected while becoming more difficult or costly to farm. Strengthening the broader agri-food network should therefore be understood as part of the practical implementation work required to support a productive, resilient, and economically viable agricultural future for the DRAP.

6.10 What These Insights Mean for the Vision

Taken together, the research and engagement findings point to a consistent conclusion: the DRAP is strongly valued as protected agricultural land, but its long-term success will depend on whether protection is truly durable, actively implemented, and resilient to shifting political priorities. Protection must also be paired with the practical conditions required for agriculture to remain viable. The DRAP contains a significant concentration of the highest capability agricultural land, Class 1 soils, which represents the highest agricultural capability classification in Canada and is a limited, finite, and non-renewable agricultural resource. The DRAP continues to support active production, but farmers operate within a complex context shaped by land tenure, ownership patterns, near-urban pressures, infrastructure impacts, and a reduced agricultural support network.

Public engagement identified strong support for long-term protection, greater awareness of the DRAP, improved signage, local food opportunities, ecological stewardship, and pathways for new and young farmers. These aspirations are important, but they must be interpreted through the realities of private ownership, existing farm operations, farmer decision-making, landowner cooperation, infrastructure needs, and business viability.

The findings therefore support a vision focused not only on keeping the DRAP protected, but on ensuring that it functions as an active, productive, and well-supported agricultural landscape. This requires stronger implementation of protection mechanisms, improved land access and tenure conditions, greater coordination with farmers and landowners, infrastructure planning that accounts for agricultural needs, opportunities for farmer-led diversification, public education that reinforces respect for working farms, and a governance structure capable of coordinating action over time.

The Strategic Directions that follow respond to these findings by translating what was heard into practical recommendations. Their purpose is not to prescribe the future of individual farm businesses, but to identify the policy, planning, partnership, and investment conditions needed for current and future farmers to operate with confidence and for the DRAP to remain a permanently protected agricultural area for generations to come.

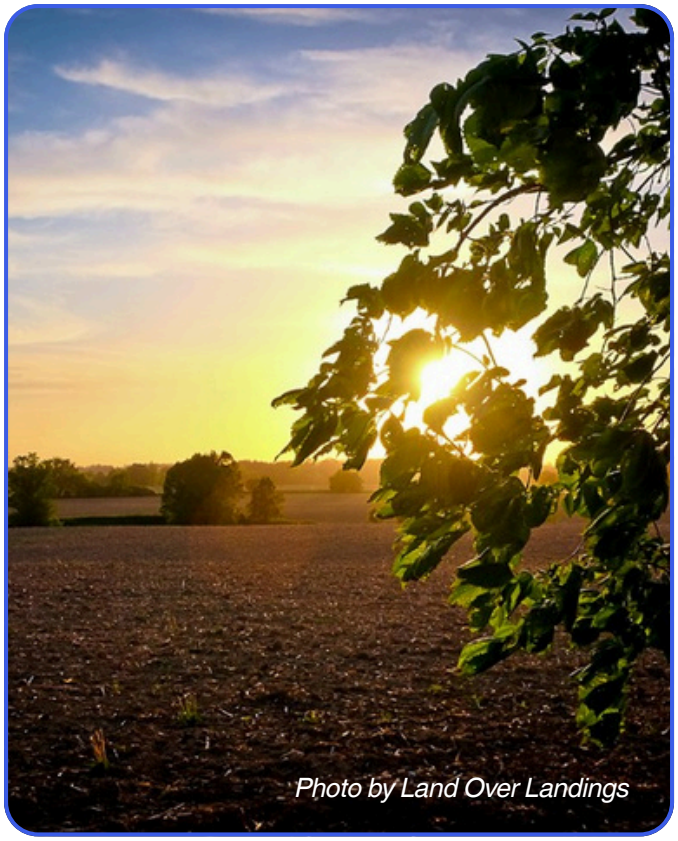


Photo by Land Over Landings

7. Strategic Directions and Priority Recommendations

Achieving the vision for the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP) will require more than maintaining the current protection framework. It will require coordinated action to ensure that the DRAP remains permanently protected, actively farmed, economically viable, publicly understood, and integrated into the broader provincial Agricultural System and Durham Regional Food System.

The following strategic directions translate the report's goals and vision pillars into priority areas for action. They are intended to identify where policy, planning, stewardship, investment, partnership, and governance changes are needed to support DRAP's long-term agricultural viability. Each direction is intended to be practical, implementable, and connected to the roles of specific partners, while recognizing that the DRAP lands are a privately owned, working agricultural landscape with complex ownership, tenure, infrastructure, and governance conditions.



Photo by Land Over Landings

The directions should also be understood as connected rather than separate. For example, land tenure affects diversification; infrastructure decisions affect farm viability; public awareness affects political support for protection; and governance will influence whether any recommendation can be implemented over time.

Strategic Directions Matrix

Strategic Direction	Primary Goals Advanced	Primary Vision Pillars Advanced
7.1 Strengthen and actively implement long-term protection mechanisms	Goals 1 and 11	Permanent Protection and Policy Certainty; Governance and implementation as a cross-cutting requirement
7.2 Keep the DRAP actively farmed and agriculturally productive	Goal 2	Agricultural Viability, Farmer Support, and Landowner Alignment
7.3 Improve land access, tenure security, landowner alignment, and new farmer pathways	Goal 3	Agricultural Viability, Farmer Support, and Landowner Alignment
7.4 Activate underutilized and strategically located lands for agriculture	Goals 3 and 5	Agricultural Viability; Resilient, Diversified, and Well-Stewarded Agricultural System
7.5 Strengthen agricultural viability in the DRAP's near-urban context	Goal 4	Agricultural Viability; Infrastructure and Land Use Coordination
7.6 Enable farmer-led diversification and local food opportunities	Goals 5 and 6	Resilient, Diversified, and Well-Stewarded Agricultural System; Integration with Durham's Regional Food System
7.7 Strengthen the Agricultural System that supports farming in and around the DRAP	Goal 7	Strengthening the Agri-Food Support Network
7.8 Coordinate infrastructure, servicing, and land use planning with agricultural needs	Goal 8	Infrastructure and Land Use Coordination
7.9 Advance ecological stewardship within an agriculture-first landscape	Goal 9	Resilient, Diversified, and Well-Stewarded Agricultural System
7.10 Improve public awareness, identity, and respect for the DRAP	Goal 10	Public Awareness, Identity, and Respect for the Preserve
7.11 Establish governance, funding, timelines, accountability, and monitoring	Goal 11	Cross-cutting implementation requirement for all pillars

7.1 Strengthen and Align Long-Term Protection Mechanisms

DRAP is already protected through several overlapping tools: the Planning Act, the Provincial Planning Statement, the Greenbelt Plan, the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act, the Durham Regional Official Plan, the City of Pickering Official Plan and Zoning By-law, and agricultural conservation easements registered on title. These tools have been highly significant. Despite intense development pressure and the temporary removal of Greenbelt and DRAP Act protections in 2022, the broader protection framework has helped prevent the wholesale conversion of the DRAP to non-agricultural development.

However, protection should not be understood only as preventing development. The next phase of protection must focus on whether the framework is being implemented in a way that supports active agricultural use, long-term farm investment, and the intent of the agricultural easements. A designation or easement may protect land on paper, but DRAP's long-term success will depend on whether those tools are monitored, interpreted, administered, and coordinated to support active agriculture.

Priority Recommendations:

- Establish a broader DRAP Agricultural Vision Implementation Table, Stewardship Council, or similar structure involving the Province, Durham Region, City of Pickering, agricultural organizations, easement holders or enforcement bodies, conservation organizations, farm representatives, and landowner representatives where appropriate.
- Develop a clear easement monitoring and compliance protocol, including regular review of whether the lands are being used in a manner consistent with the agricultural purpose of the easements.
- Explore options to strengthen the administration of the DRAP agricultural easements, including transferring or co-holding the easements with a qualified conservation organization or land trust, to ensure an ongoing, effective, transparent, and publicly accountable program of monitoring, stewardship, and enforcement of easement conditions.
- Explore whether new provincial or municipal tools are needed to support the intent of the DRAP, such as special Greenbelt Plan policies for the DRAP, a DRAP-specific implementation guideline, or a formal agricultural viability strategy.
- Require that future planning, infrastructure, or policy decisions affecting DRAP explicitly assess impacts on agricultural viability, not only impacts on land use designation.

Primary partners: Province of Ontario, Durham Region, City of Pickering, easement holders/enforcement bodies.

Supporting partners: Ontario Farmland Trust, agricultural organizations, conservation authorities, Greenbelt Foundation, farm representatives, landowners.

7.2 Keep the DRAP Actively Farmed and Agriculturally Productive

The agricultural value of the DRAP depends not only on protection of the land, but on its continued use as a working agricultural landscape. The DRAP should remain actively farmed, productive, and capable of supporting viable agricultural operations over the long term.

This direction recognizes the central importance of current farm operators. Farmers bring the knowledge, equipment, labour, experience, and stewardship required to sustain agricultural productivity. Future planning for the DRAP should support existing viable farm operations while also creating conditions that allow agriculture to evolve over time where farmers, landowners, infrastructure, and market conditions make that feasible.

Keeping the DRAP actively farmed also requires attention to the practical conditions that make farming possible: secure access to land, functional drainage, field entrances, soil health, farm infrastructure, safe equipment movement, and landowner cooperation. A protected agricultural landscape cannot be considered successful if its lands are protected on paper but become more difficult, fragmented, or uneconomic to farm in practice.

Priority Recommendations:

- The agricultural value of the DRAP depends not only on protection of the land, but on its continued use as a working agricultural landscape. The DRAP should remain actively farmed, productive, and capable of supporting viable agricultural operations over the long term.
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- Keeping the DRAP actively farmed also requires attention to the practical conditions that make farming possible: secure access to land, functional drainage, field entrances, soil health, farm infrastructure, safe equipment movement, and landowner cooperation. A protected agricultural landscape cannot be considered successful if its lands are protected on paper but become more difficult, fragmented, or uneconomic to farm in practice.





Figure 23: *The map identifies areas in agricultural production alongside lands that may be suitable for future agricultural use.*

Primary partners: Farmers, landowners, Province of Ontario, Durham Region, City of Pickering.

Supporting partners: Local agricultural organizations, conservation authorities, farm service providers, the Greenbelt Foundation, the Ontario Farmland Trust.

7.3 Improve Land Access, Tenure Security, Landowner Alignment, and New Farmer Pathways

Ensuring that farmers have reliable and secure access to land will be critical to the future of the DRAP. In the DRAP, much of the land is farmed under lease arrangements, and in some cases those leases may be short-term, renewal-dependent, or otherwise uncertain from the perspective of long-term agricultural investment. This creates uncertainty for farm operators and discourages investments that require a longer planning horizon.

Improving land access must therefore be understood in several ways. Current farmers need greater tenure security so they can continue operating, investing, and planning with confidence. New and young farmers need clearer entry points into agriculture over time. Landowners need to understand their role in supporting the agricultural purpose of the DRAP through lease terms, access arrangements, and permissions for agricultural improvements. These goals are connected: a protected agricultural preserve should maintain current production while also supporting renewal, succession, and the next generation of farm businesses.

New and young farmers face significant barriers to accessing land, particularly in near-urban areas where land values are high and competition for land is intense. DRAP's permanent agricultural protection creates a unique opportunity to test land access models that would be difficult elsewhere, including long-term leases, incubator plots, shared infrastructure, mentorship, and partnerships with land trusts, public agencies, farm organizations, and educational institutions. These opportunities should be pursued in a way that complements existing farm operations and respects the realities of private ownership, lease relationships, and farm business decision-making.

The goal should not be to prescribe who farms which lands or what they grow. Rather, the goal should be to create tenure conditions that allow current farmers, future farmers, and beginning farmers to make confident business decisions to strengthen long-term stewardship, investment, and continuity within the agricultural landscape.

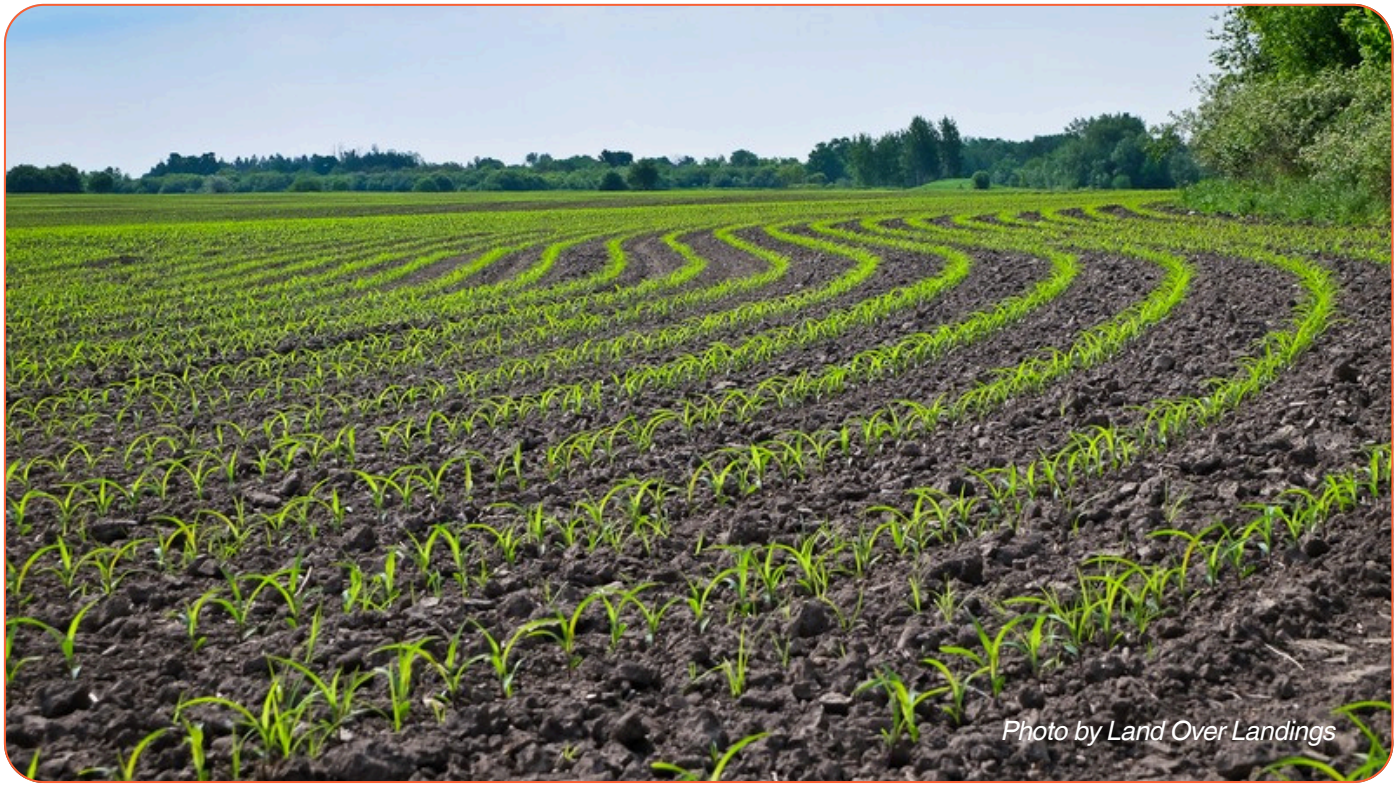
Priority Recommendations:

- Develop a model agricultural lease framework for the DRAP that encourages longer lease terms, clear renewal provisions, fair termination notice, and provisions that support long-term investment in soil health and infrastructure.
- Explore provincial legislation or policy guidance requiring a minimum lease term for agricultural lands, as seen in other countries with stronger agricultural lease requirements, with a suggested minimum of five years.
- Create incentives for landowners who offer longer-term leases to active farmers, such as recognition programs, property tax considerations where available, or eligibility for stewardship and infrastructure funding.
- Identify opportunities for public agencies, utilities, land trusts, or non-profit organizations to secure land and make it available to farmers through long-term leases.
- Establish a DRAP new farmer pathway that could include incubator plots, demonstration sites, shared equipment, mentorship, business planning support, and transition opportunities for farmers seeking to scale up from smaller parcels.
- Explore partnerships with colleges, universities, farm organizations, new farmer training programs, and community food organizations to support training, applied research, and practical learning opportunities within the DRAP.

- Identify smaller parcels, utility corridor lands, field edges, or publicly controlled lands that may be suitable for new farmer access, market gardening, seed production, specialty crops, or other small-scale agricultural enterprises.
- Explore funding sources to support new farmer access, including provincial agricultural programs, Greenbelt Foundation funding, municipal economic development programs, philanthropic support, and partnerships with non-profit land access organizations.
- Support gradual transition toward greater farmer ownership where feasible, recognizing that land ownership patterns that align more closely with active agricultural use can strengthen stewardship, investment, succession, and continuity over time.

Primary partners: Province of Ontario, landowners, farmers, Durham Region, City of Pickering.

Supporting partners: Farms at Work, Ontario Farmland Trust, local agricultural organizations, Farm Credit Canada or other agricultural lenders, Greenbelt Foundation, philanthropic partners, educational institutions (e.g., University of Guelph, Durham College), new farmer training organizations, community food organizations, utility corridor managers.


Photo by Land Over Landings

7.4 Activate Underutilized and Strategically Located Lands for Agriculture

Not all lands within DRAP are equally suited to the same type of agricultural use. Some of these lands may be especially important for new and young farmer pathways because they can provide smaller, lower-barrier entry points into agriculture without displacing existing large-scale farm operations. Where appropriate, these areas could support incubator farms, market gardens, demonstration plots, seed production, community-supported agriculture, or other smaller-scale enterprises that require less acreage but benefit from secure tenure, water access, shared infrastructure, and proximity to nearby communities[103].

The hydro corridor through the southern portion of the DRAP is a particularly important opportunity to review. Current zoning appears to limit new agricultural uses in the utility corridor, even though compatible agricultural uses may be possible if safety, access, servicing, and utility requirements are addressed. Infrastructure Ontario's Provincial Secondary Land Use Program identifies agriculture as a potential private secondary use of transmission corridor lands[104]. Examples of agricultural uses occurring in Ontario hydro corridors include Malvern Urban Farm in Scarborough, a three-acre farm located in the Finch hydro corridor[105], and Flemo Farm in Flemingdon Park, a half-acre urban farm located in a hydro corridor. These examples suggest that the DRAP corridor could be a good candidate for compatible new agricultural uses.

Recommended actions:

- Undertake a parcel and opportunity assessment to identify lands that may be suitable for small-scale agriculture, market gardening, community-supported agriculture, training plots, or new farmer incubator uses.
- Identify smaller parcels, utility corridor lands, field edges, irregular parcels, publicly controlled lands, or areas adjacent to natural features that may be suitable for complementary agricultural uses.
- Review the zoning of utility corridor lands to determine whether compatible agricultural uses could be permitted more clearly.
- Work with utility corridor managers to assess whether portions of the corridor could be leased to small-scale vegetable growers or other compatible agricultural users.
- Identify potential locations for shared agricultural infrastructure, such as water access, tool storage, wash/pack facilities, cold storage, compost access, and farmgate sales.
- Prioritize uses that complement, rather than conflict with, existing farm operations.

Primary partners: City of Pickering, utility corridor owners/managers, Province of Ontario, landowners.

Supporting partners: Durham Region, Ontario Farmland Trust, farm organizations, new farmer training organizations, Greenbelt Foundation, community food organizations.

7.5 Strengthen Agricultural Viability in a Near-Urban Context

Farming in DRAP occurs within a complex near-urban environment. This creates pressures, including land use conflict, traffic, trespass, infrastructure fragmentation, high land values, and uncertainty about surrounding development. However, proximity to urban populations also creates opportunities, including direct-market sales, agri-food entrepreneurship, education, local food connections, and public support for farmland protection.

Agricultural viability in DRAP must therefore be actively supported. Farmers operating in the DRAP should not be expected to succeed on the strength of land protection alone. Protected farmland can still become difficult to farm if surrounding land use, infrastructure, ownership, and policy decisions do not support day-to-day agricultural operations. Planning, infrastructure, economic development, and public policy decisions should therefore be assessed for how they affect farm viability, not only for whether they maintain the land's agricultural designation.

Any effort to enhance agricultural viability must be farmer-led and grounded in farm business realities. The vision does not assume that farmers want to diversify, shift production, or engage directly with the public. Instead, public policy should remove barriers that would support the pursuit of such enterprises and create options so that farmers who wish to pursue these opportunities can do so.

Recommended actions:

- Consult directly with farmers before designing any programs intended to support diversification, direct marketing, or on-farm diversified uses.
- Ensure municipal zoning and permitting processes clearly support agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses where they are consistent with agricultural protection and the easement framework.
- Explore funding programs for shared infrastructure that could reduce costs for farmers interested in diversification, such as cold storage, wash/pack facilities, signage, market access, distribution partnerships, or shared equipment.
- Support business planning, succession planning, and new enterprise development for interested farm operators.

Primary partners: Farmers, agricultural organizations, City of Pickering, Durham Region, Province of Ontario.

Supporting partners: Ontario Farmland Trust, economic development agencies, Greenbelt Foundation, agricultural lenders, community food organizations, educational institutions.

7.6 Enable Farmer-Led Diversification and Local Food Opportunities

The DRAP should continue to support strong agricultural production while creating opportunities for greater diversity over time where conditions allow. Current production, including established field crop rotations, remains important and should be respected. Field crop agriculture contributes to Ontario's agri-food economy and can continue to play a productive role within the DRAP.

At the same time, engagement through this project identified interest in a broader range of agricultural activities, including direct-market production, fruit and vegetable crops, farm markets, community-supported agriculture, livestock-related opportunities, and other forms of local food production. These interests should be understood as opportunities, not prescriptions. The report should not direct farmers away from field crop production or prescribe what they should grow. Rather, the priority is to remove unnecessary barriers, identify suitable opportunities, and support a more resilient agricultural landscape that can respond to changing markets, climate conditions, community interests, and farmer aspirations.

The DRAP is not a food system on its own; its primary contribution to Durham's Regional Food System is as a protected agricultural land base, with additional opportunities for local food access, direct-market activity, education, and community connection where these are farmer-led and feasible.

Diversification should also be understood within the broader Agricultural System. A farmer's ability to diversify depends not only on land capability, but also on tenure security, water access, drainage, farm infrastructure, labour, market access, processing, storage, distribution, transportation, landowner support, and clear planning permissions.

Priority Recommendations:

- Support continued productive field crop agriculture where it remains viable and appropriate.
- Enable diversified agricultural activities where farmers choose to pursue them and where land, water, access, infrastructure, labour, tenure, landowner support, and market conditions make them feasible.
- Identify farmers and landowners interested in farmgate sales, direct-market opportunities, community-supported agriculture, institutional markets, local distribution, or local food partnerships, while recognizing that participation must be voluntary and farmer-led.
- Identify parcel types and locations that may be suitable for complementary forms of agriculture, including smaller-scale production, without displacing or undermining existing viable farm operations.
- Support local food and direct-market opportunities, including farm stands, farm markets, community-supported agriculture, institutional markets, local distribution, and related activities, where these are farmer-led, economically viable, compatible with existing farm operations, and consistent with the agricultural purpose of the DRAP.

- Encourage land use policy, zoning, and easement interpretation that support agriculture-related and on-farm diversified uses where they are compatible with primary agricultural use.
- Explore whether shared aggregation, distribution, cold storage, wash/pack, or marketing infrastructure would be of interest to farmers and could further support viable farm businesses.
- Avoid implying that all DRAP production must be local or direct-market; field crops and commodity production remain important components of the broader agri-food economy.

Primary partners: Farmers, agricultural organizations, Durham food system partners, Durham Region, City of Pickering.

Supporting partners: Community food organizations, farmers' markets, educational institutions, Greenbelt Foundation, economic development agencies.

7.7 Strengthen the Agricultural System that Supports Farming in and Around the DRAP

The DRAP cannot be understood as an isolated land base. Its long-term success depends on the broader Agricultural System that supports farming across the surrounding near-urban agricultural landscape. The Provincial Planning Statement, the Greenbelt Plan, and the DRAP Act should therefore be interpreted together in a way that supports not only the protection of DRAP itself, but also the continuity and viability of the broader agricultural landscape in which the DRAP sits. Protection of the land base is essential, but the agri-food network that supports farming must also be maintained and strengthened.

This broader landscape includes agricultural lands within and around DRAP, the nearby Federal Pickering Lands, the Rouge National Urban Park, and other surrounding farmlands in Durham Region and neighbouring areas. While each of these areas has different ownership, management, and policy conditions, together they influence the continuity, viability, and visibility of agriculture at the urban edge.

The future of the remaining Pickering Federal Lands is particularly important. These lands form part of the broader agricultural and ecological context surrounding the DRAP and the Rouge National Urban Park. Their long-term protection would help maintain a larger connected landscape of farmland, natural heritage, and open space in an area under significant urban and infrastructure pressure. The transfer of remaining Pickering Federal Lands to the Rouge National Urban Park should therefore be supported, provided that future management continues to recognize and support the role of agriculture within the broader landscape and avoids undermining existing agricultural operations.

The decline or relocation of agricultural support services can also affect the viability and flexibility of farm operations. This includes reduced access to equipment dealers and repair, feed mills, input suppliers,

abattoirs, veterinary services, processing capacity, storage, custom operators, transportation, and distribution infrastructure. As these services become more distant or less available, farming can become more costly, less efficient, and less able to diversify or respond to market opportunities. Therefore, strengthening the DRAP's agricultural future requires attention to the wider network of services, facilities, businesses, and relationships that support farming.

Priority recommendations:

- Recognize DRAP as part of Ontario's broader Agricultural System rather than as a stand-alone protected area.
- Develop a specialized map of DRAP in relation to surrounding farmland, the Rouge National Urban Park, the Federal Pickering Lands, agricultural services, farm markets, transportation routes, grain elevators, input suppliers, equipment dealers, processing facilities, and distribution infrastructure.
- Assess how major planning and infrastructure decisions, including the Alto high-speed rail project, road upgrades, utility corridors, and servicing infrastructure, could affect the continuity and viability of the broader Agricultural System.
- Support the transfer of the remaining Pickering Federal Lands to the Rouge National Urban Park as part of a broader strategy to permanently protect the agricultural, ecological, and open space character of the landscape.
- Consider how continued agricultural production within the DRAP helps sustain agricultural activity, farm services, and agri-food businesses beyond its boundaries.
- Work with Durham Region's food system partners to connect the DRAP's agricultural land base to broader regional food system goals, including local food access, food literacy, community food security, and regional agri-food economic development


Photo by Land Over Landings

Primary partners: Province of Ontario, Government of Canada, Parks Canada, Durham Region, City of Pickering.

Supporting partners: Agricultural organizations, farmers, landowners, Durham food system partners, Ontario Farmland Trust, economic development agencies, transportation and infrastructure agencies, agricultural businesses, conservation organizations.

7.8 Coordinate Infrastructure, Servicing, and Land Use Planning with Agricultural Needs

Infrastructure, servicing, and land use decisions affecting DRAP should be planned and implemented in a manner that supports, rather than disrupts, agricultural operations.

This does not mean that all infrastructure affecting or adjacent to the DRAP can or should be avoided. Roads, utilities, servicing, rail or transit projects, drainage works, and other infrastructure may serve existing communities, surrounding growth areas, regional systems, or public needs. However, where infrastructure is proposed within, adjacent to, or functionally connected to DRAP, it should be assessed and designed through an agricultural impact lens from the earliest stages of planning. Where the scale, location, or potential impact of a project warrants it, a more detailed agricultural impact assessment (AIA) should be required.

Although infrastructure may be necessary, its design and implementation can have significant implications for farm access, field configuration, drainage, soil conditions, equipment movement, construction timing, and the overall efficiency of farm operations. Agricultural lands can be permanently protected on paper while still being incrementally affected by infrastructure, servicing, and surrounding land use decisions. A stronger agricultural lens is needed to ensure that impacts to farming are avoided where possible, minimized where unavoidable, and mitigated where they occur, while also identifying opportunities for infrastructure to actively support agricultural operations.

Priority recommendations:

- Apply an agricultural impact lens to road, utility, rail, servicing, drainage, and other infrastructure projects affecting or potentially affecting DRAP.
- Prioritize agriculture-supportive infrastructure design and maintenance, including safe farm equipment movement, adequate turning radii, appropriate road shoulders, sightlines, field entrances, drainage continuity, ditch and culvert maintenance, water access where appropriate, hydro capacity, and access routes between fields.
- Require infrastructure proponents and approval authorities to demonstrate how agricultural impacts have been avoided, minimized, and mitigated, including impacts to field access, drainage, field configuration, soil conditions, equipment movement, construction timing, and long-term farm operational efficiency.
- Maintain field contiguity, drainage continuity, farm entrances, access routes, and safe equipment movement.
- Consider farm equipment turning radii, road shoulders and guardrails, roadside tree and brush maintenance, signage placement, roundabouts, traffic signals, road widths, construction timing, and access routes in infrastructure design.

- Minimize further fragmentation or operational disruption to the agricultural land base.
- Ensure that affected farmers and farm operators are consulted early when infrastructure, servicing, roadwork, or land use decisions may affect their operations.
- Establish clear communication protocols for roadwork, ditch maintenance, culvert replacement, utility work, temporary closures, and construction activities that may affect farm access or seasonal operations.
- Ensure that infrastructure and land use decisions affecting DRAP are evaluated not only for land use conformity, but for their practical effects on agricultural viability.

Primary partners: Durham Region, City of Pickering, Province of Ontario, infrastructure agencies, utility providers.

Supporting partners: Farmers, landowners, conservation authorities, transportation agencies, agricultural organizations, easement holders or enforcement bodies.

7.9 Advance Ecological Stewardship within an Agriculture-First Landscape

The DRAP's primary purpose is agricultural, but the DRAP also contributes to ecological connectivity, watershed health, natural heritage protection, and climate resilience. Agricultural use and environmental stewardship should be understood as complementary objectives where they are carefully planned, appropriately managed, and compatible with active farming.

Future stewardship should protect and enhance natural features and ecological functions while maintaining the integrity, productivity, and continuity of the agricultural land base. Stewardship initiatives should therefore be practical, voluntary where appropriate, and developed with farmers and landowners. They should be supported through technical assistance, incentives, and funding, particularly where stewardship actions provide broader public benefits such as improved water quality, habitat connectivity, soil health, or climate resilience.

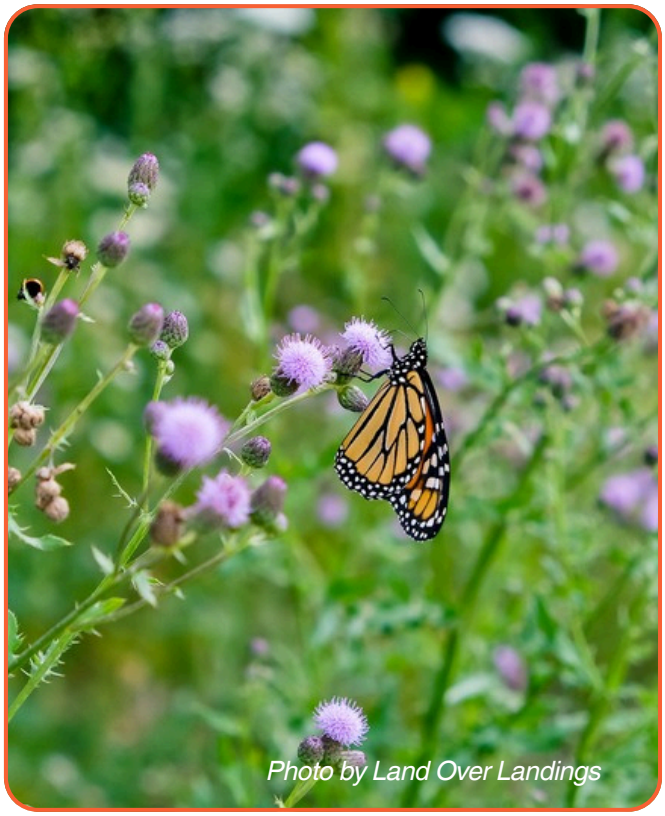


Photo by Land Over Landings

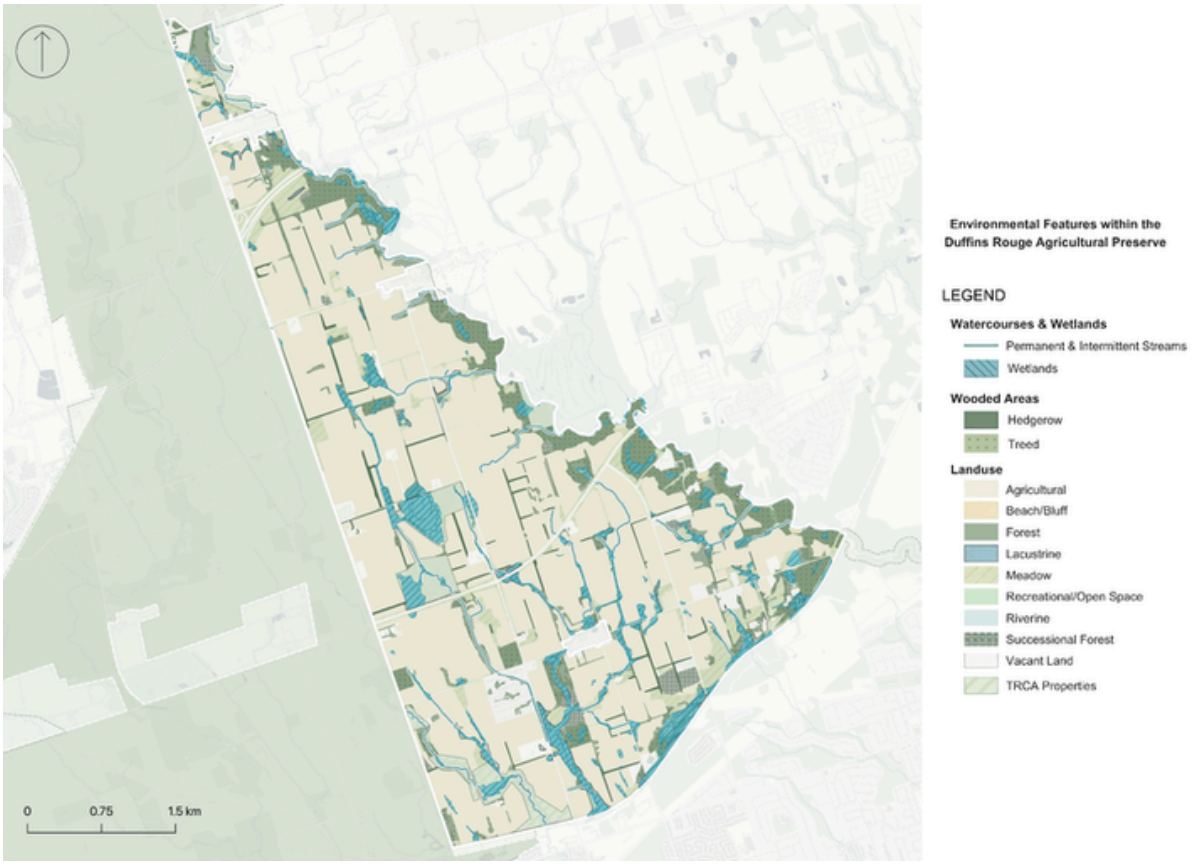


Figure 24: *This map illustrates the distribution of watercourses, wooded areas, and other environmental and land-use features within the DRAP.*

Priority Recommendations:

- Support the continued use and adoption of agricultural Beneficial Management Practices (BMP's) appropriate to farm operations, site conditions, and long-term soil and water stewardship, including by addressing lease, permission, and funding barriers that may affect tenant farmers' ability to implement stewardship practices.
- Develop clear pathways for tenant farmers to participate in stewardship and BMP funding programs, including identifying when landowner consent is required, when tenant farmers may be eligible applicants, and how lease terms or written permissions can support stewardship actions without compromising tenant-landowner relationships.
- Maintain agriculture as the primary land use and organizing principle for the DRAP.
- Protect and enhance natural heritage features, riparian areas, wetlands, woodlots, hedgerows, and ecological connections in a manner compatible with active farming.
- Support soil health, functional drainage, water quality, biodiversity, climate resilience, and watershed health.
- Encourage stewardship practices that benefit both agricultural productivity and environmental function.

- Support farmers and landowners with technical assistance, incentives, and funding to implement stewardship practices that provide agricultural and ecological benefits.
- Ensure ecological restoration or enhancement projects are designed to avoid fragmentation of productive farmland and to maintain field access, drainage, and farm operational efficiency.
- Avoid natural heritage, recreation, or public access initiatives that fragment farmland, undermine viable farm operations, or create new conflicts for farmers and landowners.

Primary partners: Farmers, landowners, conservation authorities, Province of Ontario, Durham Region, City of Pickering, Government of Canada.

Supporting partners: Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, Ontario Farmland Trust, local agricultural organizations, environmental organizations, Greenbelt Foundation, stewardship funding partners.

7.10 Improve Public Awareness, Identity, and Respect for the DRAP

Many residents and decision-makers are not familiar with the DRAP, its history, its agricultural purpose, or how it differs from the nearby Rouge National Urban Park. Improving public awareness is essential to building long-term support for the DRAP, reducing conflict between urban residents and working farms, and strengthening the DRAP's identity as a permanently protected, agriculture-first landscape.

Public education should emphasize that DRAP is a working agricultural landscape. It should not encourage unmanaged public access onto private farmland or create expectations that all areas of the DRAP are recreational or publicly accessible. Rather, it should help residents, visitors, decision-makers, and surrounding communities understand why DRAP exists, why it is protected, how it differs from Rouge National Urban Park, and how active farming contributes to the public value of the landscape.

Public education should also support respectful behaviour around working farms. As nearby urban areas continue to grow, clear communication will be needed to reduce conflicts, improve understanding of normal farm practices, and reinforce that DRAP is a protected agricultural area made up largely of privately owned and actively farmed lands. Public awareness efforts should include clear messaging that illegal dumping on farmland, field entrances, roadsides, and rural properties is harmful to farm operations and inconsistent with respect for the DRAP as a working agricultural landscape. The City, Region, and other relevant public agencies should explore improved reporting, cleanup coordination, enforcement, and signage in areas where dumping has become a recurring issue.

Priority Recommendations:

- Implement a public education program that explains why the DRAP's high-capability agricultural land cannot be readily replaced and how it is important to Ontario's agri-food system and long-term food system resilience.
- Develop workshops, webinars, school resources, signage, and public-facing materials that support this education program, including content on farmland protection, agricultural history, soil capability, normal farm practices, and respectful behaviour near working farms.
- Create communication materials for nearby residents explaining farm equipment movement, seasonal farm activities, normal farm practices, and the importance of respecting private property.
- Develop a DRAP signage and wayfinding strategy, including matters of trespassing and illegal dumping.
- Install gateway signs at key entrances explaining that DRAP is a protected agricultural preserve and working farm area.
- Develop interpretive signage on public rights-of-way or appropriate public lands explaining the history of DRAP, the Greenbelt, agricultural easements, local soils, watersheds, and the role of farming.
- Create public education materials that distinguish DRAP from Rouge National Urban Park while explaining their ecological and agricultural relationship.
- Consider a public-facing DRAP webpage or digital story map that brings together maps, history, policy context, farm stories, ecological connectivity, and opportunities for engagement.
- Promote the final report through community events, farmers' markets, municipal channels, and agricultural networks.

Primary partners: Ontario Farmland Trust, City of Pickering, Durham Region, Greenbelt Foundation.

Supporting partners: farmers, agricultural organizations, schools, conservation organizations, community groups, Rouge National Urban Park partners where appropriate.

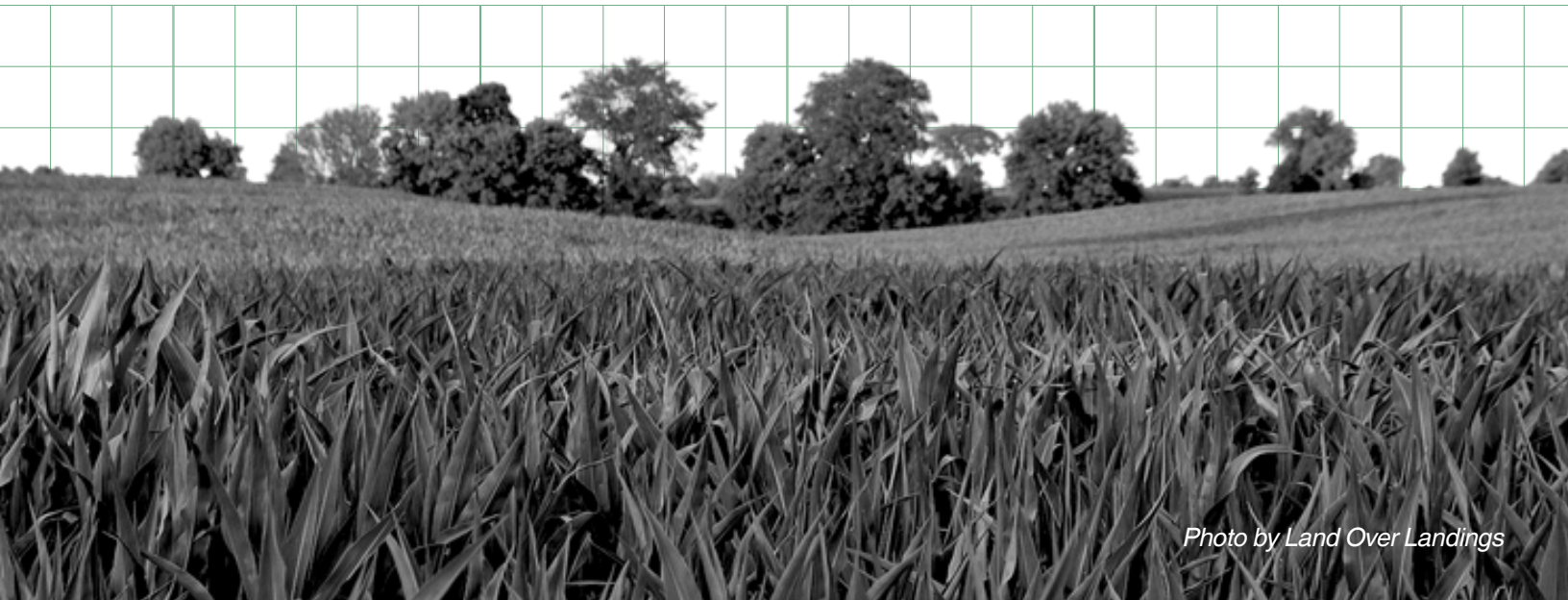


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7.11 Establish Clear Governance, Funding, Timelines, Accountability, and Monitoring

Many of the recommendations in this report will require coordination across multiple parties. Without a governance structure, there is a risk that the vision remains aspirational and implementation becomes fragmented.

The DRAP's complexity, including multiple levels of government, private landowners, tenant farmers, agricultural organizations, conservation interests, infrastructure agencies, utility providers, and community stakeholders, requires a coordinated structure for implementation. Not every recommendation can be implemented by the same partner, on the same timeline, or through the same funding source. Some actions may be led by the Province, Durham Region, the City of Pickering, or public agencies; others may depend on landowner participation, farmer interest, agricultural organizations, conservation partners, or non-profit leadership.

Governance should therefore provide a way to coordinate action, assign responsibility, identify resources, monitor progress, and address barriers as they arise. Without a clear implementation structure, even strong policy directions risk remaining aspirational.

Priority Recommendations:

- Use the DRAP Agricultural Vision Implementation Table, Stewardship Council, or similar structure identified in Section 7.1 as the primary forum for coordinating governance, implementation, accountability, timelines, monitoring, and reporting for the DRAP vision.
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of lead agencies, implementation partners, landowners, farmers, farm organizations, conservation partners, infrastructure agencies, community food system partners, and supporting organizations for each major recommendation, where applicable.
- Develop a multi-year implementation plan with near-term, medium-term, and long-term priorities, lead partners, timelines, funding needs, and measurable outcomes.
- Assign responsibility for identifying, coordinating, and pursuing funding opportunities from provincial, regional, municipal, federal, philanthropic, non-profit, and private sources.
- Ensure farmers and farm organizations have a meaningful role in implementation, while respecting confidentiality, lease relationships, and the practical realities of farm business operations.
- Create a process for engaging landowners where implementation depends on lease terms, access arrangements, infrastructure permissions, stewardship projects, land management decisions, or participation in future agricultural opportunities.
- Establish benchmarks and a monitoring and evaluation framework to track progress over time.
- Develop a regular public reporting mechanism, such as a periodic "State of the DRAP" update or implementation scorecard, to assess progress on protection, active agricultural use, tenure security, infrastructure coordination, public awareness, ecological stewardship, and agricultural viability.
- Review and update the DRAP vision, implementation plan, priority actions, metrics, and reporting framework at least every five years to assess progress, respond to changing conditions, and identify where additional focus, funding, or coordination is needed.

- Create a process for engaging landowners where implementation depends on lease terms, access arrangements, infrastructure permissions, stewardship projects, or land management decisions.
- Establish benchmarks and create a monitoring and evaluation framework to track progress over time.
- Develop a regular public reporting mechanism, such as a periodic “State of the DRAP” update or implementation scorecard, to assess progress on protection, active agricultural use, tenure security, infrastructure coordination, public awareness, ecological stewardship, and agricultural viability



Photo by Land Over Landings

Primary partners: Province of Ontario, Durham Region, City of Pickering, Ontario Farmland Trust.

Supporting partners: farmers, landowners, agricultural organizations, Greenbelt Foundation, conservation authorities, community partners.

Together, these strategic directions provide a pathway to translate the vision for the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve into action. They recognize that permanent protection is the foundation, but not the whole solution. For the DRAP to succeed, protection must be paired with active agricultural use, secure tenure, farmer confidence, landowner alignment, supportive infrastructure, appropriate governance, ecological stewardship, public understanding, and investment in the broader Agricultural System. The goal is not simply to keep the DRAP free from non-agricultural development, but to ensure that it remains a productive, resilient, and vibrant agricultural area for generations to come.

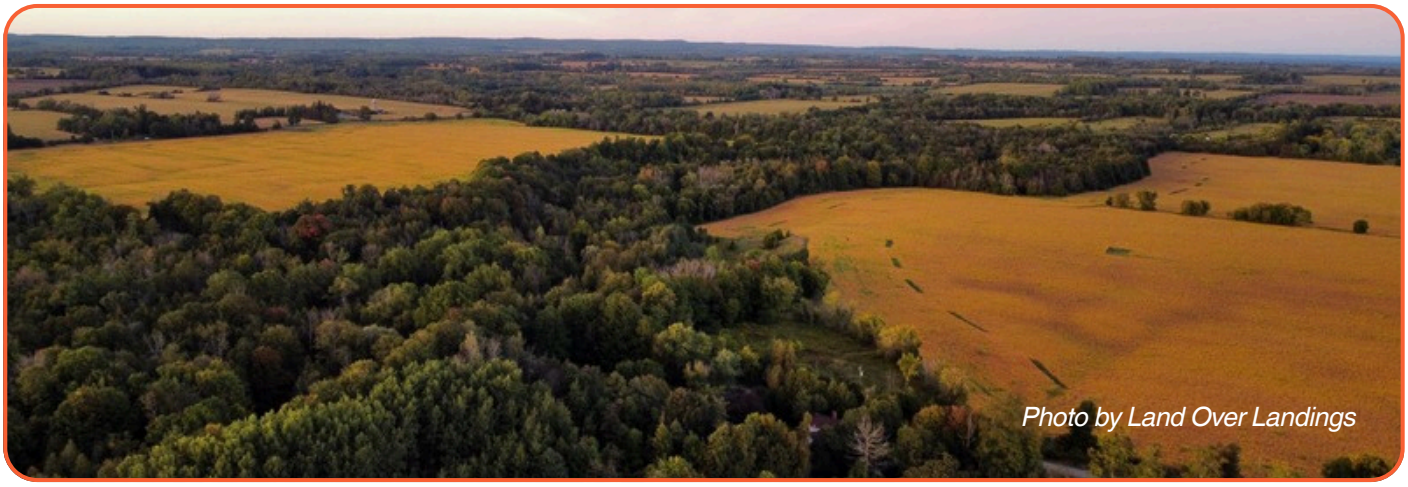


Photo by Land Over Landings

8. Measuring Success

The long-term success of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP) will depend on sustained action by many partners over time. The vision outlined in this report provides one framework for supporting that success by identifying the conditions, partnerships, and implementation actions needed to strengthen permanent protection, active farming, agricultural viability, stewardship, and public understanding. The purpose of this section is to identify practical measures that can be used to assess whether progress is being made toward those conditions.

Measuring success should therefore focus on both protection and function. It should ask not only whether the lands remain designated and protected for agriculture, but whether the conditions exist for agriculture to thrive. Therefore, a monitoring framework should be developed as part of implementation. This framework should begin with a baseline assessment of current conditions and then track progress at regular intervals. Given the sensitivity of land tenure, ownership, and farm business information within DRAP, any reporting should be aggregated, non-attributable, and designed to protect the confidentiality of farmers and landowners. The purpose of measurement should be to identify progress, gaps, and implementation needs and not to evaluate individual farms or disclose private business arrangements.

As mentioned in Strategic Direction 7.11, a periodic “State of the DRAP” update or implementation scorecard should be prepared to track progress and maintain accountability. This could be updated annually or every two years by the proposed DRAP Agricultural Implementation Table or similar coordinating body.

The following indicators provide a starting point for measuring success.



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Goal/Outcome Area	Possible Measures of Success
Permanent agricultural protection	DRAP remains within the Greenbelt and subject to the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act; agricultural easements remain registered on title and are actively monitored; no net loss of protected agricultural land; policy reviews strengthen rather than weaken the agricultural purpose of the DRAP; clear responsibility is established for easement monitoring, compliance, and implementation.
Active agricultural use and productivity	Total acreage and proportion of DRAP in active agricultural use are tracked over time as key measures of the DRAP's long-term agricultural function; the amount and proportion of land in active agricultural use is maintained or increased where appropriate; workable agricultural land is identified and tracked; soil capability and active production mapping are updated periodically; field access, drainage, farm entrances, and agricultural infrastructure are maintained; recommendations or projects do not displace or undermine existing viable farm operations.
Farmer access, tenure security, and investment conditions	Longer-term agricultural leases become more common over time; model lease tools or guidance are developed; landowners increasingly provide stable access and permissions for agricultural improvements; farmers report greater confidence in planning and investment conditions; new farmer access opportunities are identified without displacing existing farm operations; pathways emerge for land access or ownership to align more closely with active farming.
Near-urban agricultural viability	Municipal, regional, and provincial decisions affecting the DRAP are reviewed through an agricultural viability lens; land use conflicts are reduced; farm equipment movement, construction timing, field configuration, drainage, and access are considered in infrastructure planning; farmers are consulted early on projects that may affect operations; nearby growth is managed in ways that respect normal farm practices.

Goal/Outcome Area	Possible Measures of Success
Farmer-led diversification and local food opportunities	Farmers who wish to diversify are supported by clear permissions, appropriate infrastructure, and feasible business conditions; opportunities for farmgate sales, farm stands, community-supported agriculture, institutional markets, or local distribution are identified where farmer-led and viable; shared infrastructure needs such as wash/pack, cold storage, aggregation, distribution, or marketing support are assessed; field crop agriculture continues to be recognized as a valid and important contribution to the agri-food economy.
Agricultural System and agri-food network	DRAP is mapped and understood in relation to surrounding farmland, the Federal Pickering Lands, Rouge National Urban Park, agricultural services, transportation routes, markets, processing, storage, distribution, and input suppliers; gaps in agricultural services and infrastructure are identified; partnerships are developed to support farm services and agri-food businesses; major infrastructure and land use decisions are assessed for impacts on the continuity of the broader Agricultural System.
Infrastructure, servicing, and land use coordination	Infrastructure proponents demonstrate how agricultural impacts have been avoided, minimized, and mitigated; communication protocols are established for roadwork, ditch maintenance, culvert replacement, utility work, and temporary closures; farm entrances, drainage outlets, field contiguity, and equipment movement are maintained; agricultural considerations are incorporated into road design, signage placement, turning radii, shoulders, sightlines, and construction timing.
Ecological stewardship within an agriculture-first landscape	Soil health, water quality, drainage, riparian areas, wetlands, woodlots, hedgerows, biodiversity, and climate resilience are supported in ways compatible with active farming; soil health indicators are monitored over time where landowner permission, farmer participation, funding, and appropriate sampling protocols allow; farmers and landowners have access to stewardship funding and technical assistance; ecological restoration or enhancement projects avoid fragmentation of productive farmland; stewardship actions provide both agricultural and environmental benefits where possible.

Goal/Outcome Area	Possible Measures of Success
Public awareness, identity, and respect for DRAP	Gateway signage, interpretive materials, maps, and public education resources are improved; residents and decision-makers better understand DRAP's history, boundaries, agricultural purpose, easements, Greenbelt significance, and distinction from Rouge National Urban Park; farm-respect messaging is implemented; trespass, unsafe roadside behaviour, and conflicts with farm operations are reduced; educational activities occur only with willing farmers and landowners and in ways compatible with active farming.
Governance, accountability, and implementation	A DRAP Agricultural Implementation Table, Stewardship Council, or similar structure is established; lead agencies, partners, timelines, and funding requirements are identified for major recommendations; farmers and farm organizations have a meaningful role in implementation while confidentiality is protected; landowners are engaged where implementation depends on access, lease terms, permissions, or land management; progress is reported through a regular implementation update or scorecard.

The indicators above should be refined through implementation. Some measures can be tracked using existing data, such as mapping, policy review, infrastructure planning records, zoning updates, and public communications. Others may require new data collection, voluntary reporting, confidential interviews, or partnership-based monitoring. In all cases, data collection should be practical, respectful, and proportionate to the purpose of the report.

The first priority should be to establish a baseline at the time of establishing the implementation body. This should include, at minimum, the amount and proportion of land in active agricultural production, soil capability, natural heritage features, major infrastructure corridors, known agricultural service connections, relevant land use designations, and existing public awareness tools such as signage. In some cases, these baselines are already established through this report or through other sources. Where possible, the baseline should also identify, in an aggregated and non-identifying manner, key tenure, access, infrastructure, and farm viability issues affecting agricultural use. Soil health indicators should be incorporated where landowner permission, farmer participation, funding, and appropriate sampling protocols allow.

Over time, success should be measured by whether the DRAP is moving from uncertainty toward stability. Progress will not be defined by a single indicator. Rather, success will be demonstrated if the DRAP remains

permanently protected, continues to be actively farmed, supports current and future farmers, strengthens its connection to the broader Agricultural System and Durham Regional Food System, advances stewardship in ways compatible with agriculture, and builds public understanding of why this protected agricultural landscape matters.

The purpose of measuring success is not to freeze DRAP in its current form. It is to ensure that change occurs in a way that reinforces the DRAP's agricultural purpose. A clear monitoring framework will help decision-makers, farmers, landowners, agencies, and community partners understand whether the vision is being implemented and where further action is needed.

9. Conclusion: From Uncertainty to Stability

The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP) represents a rare and valuable opportunity to strengthen one of Ontario's most significant protected agricultural areas within one of Canada's fastest-growing regions. Its importance extends beyond its boundaries. DRAP speaks to broader provincial priorities related to farmland protection, agricultural viability, food system resilience, ecological connectivity, and responsible land use planning at the urban edge.

As this report has outlined, the long-term success of the DRAP will depend not only on maintaining its protected status, but on ensuring that it remains actively farmed, economically viable, and capable of adapting to changing agricultural, environmental, and regional conditions. Protection is the foundation, but protection alone is not sufficient. The next phase of DRAP's future must focus on implementation: secure land tenure, farmer confidence, landowner alignment, infrastructure coordination, agricultural support services, public education, and governance mechanisms that ensure the DRAP functions as intended.

At the centre of this vision is the agricultural community that keeps the land in production. Farmers bring the knowledge, equipment, labour, investment, and experience required to sustain the productivity of the DRAP. Their ability to operate with confidence, plan for the future, and make farm business decisions over a meaningful time horizon is essential. At the same time, landowners, governments, conservation partners, and community organizations also have important roles to play. The future of DRAP will depend on whether these partners can align around the agricultural purpose of the lands and create the conditions required for long-term agricultural success.

DRAP can also become an important model for how protected agricultural lands can function in a near-urban context. This model will not emerge automatically. It will need to be built through intentional policy, planning, investment, stewardship, and public engagement. If implemented well, DRAP can demonstrate how agricultural conservation easements, Greenbelt protections, municipal planning, farmer-led enterprise development, and community education can work together to support a protected and productive agricultural landscape.

The lessons from DRAP can also inform broader farmland protection efforts across Ontario. As communities across the province face increasing pressure on prime agricultural land, DRAP offers an opportunity to better understand what is required to move from land protection on paper to agricultural viability in practice. Its experience can help shape future agricultural preserves, conservation easement models, land access initiatives, and policy tools that support farmland protection while keeping land actively and productively farmed.

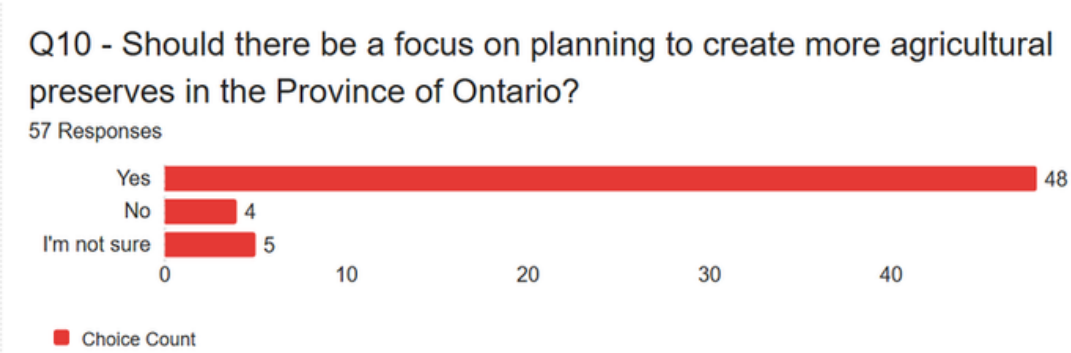


***Figure 25**: Survey responses on whether there should be a focus on creating more agricultural preserves in Ontario*

Survey responses also suggest that many participants saw the DRAP as relevant beyond Pickering and Durham Region. When asked whether there should be a focus on planning to create more agricultural preserves in Ontario, 48 of 57 respondents answered yes. While this result should be interpreted as engagement feedback rather than a representative public opinion poll, it reinforces the importance of using the lessons from DRAP to inform future farmland protection tools, agricultural preserve models, and land access strategies elsewhere in Ontario.

Ultimately, this vision is grounded in a simple but enduring principle: high-quality agricultural land is a finite and non-renewable resource, and once protected, it should remain available for active agricultural use for generations to come. Through sustained commitment, thoughtful planning, and ongoing collaboration, the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve can move from recurring uncertainty toward lasting stability and stand as a vibrant agricultural asset for Ontario

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