Agriculture, Farmland Preservation and Ontario's Greenbelt – An Opportunity for Agro-ecological Transitions

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April 6, 2019

American Association of Geographers

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Ontario, Within Canada

Since 2005 Ontario has aggressively pursued new planning policies around the Toronto-centred region.
Why?

The Toronto Centred Region - Overview

- Covers 7.9 million acres.
- Produces nearly 25 % of Canada's GDP.
- One of the fastest growing areas in Canada (an additional 4.5 million people expected within the next 30 years)
- Represents only 0.3% of Canada's land base
- Provides 17 % of Ontario's prime agricultural land base.

- The Greater Golden Horseshoe

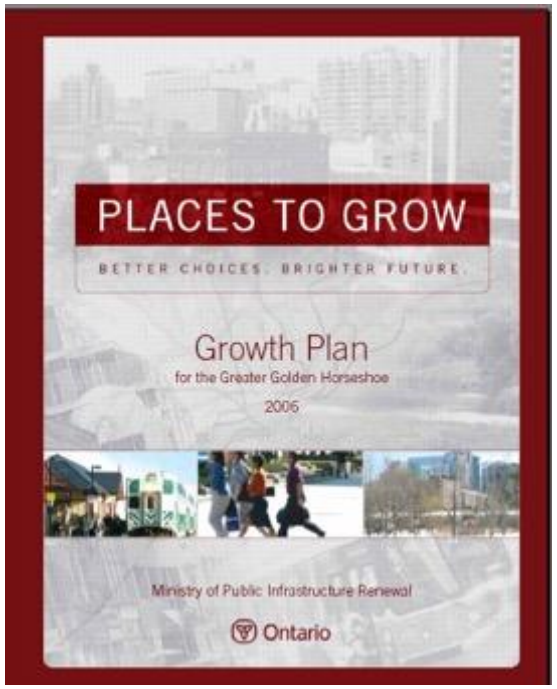
Fundamentals of Ontario Planning Practice

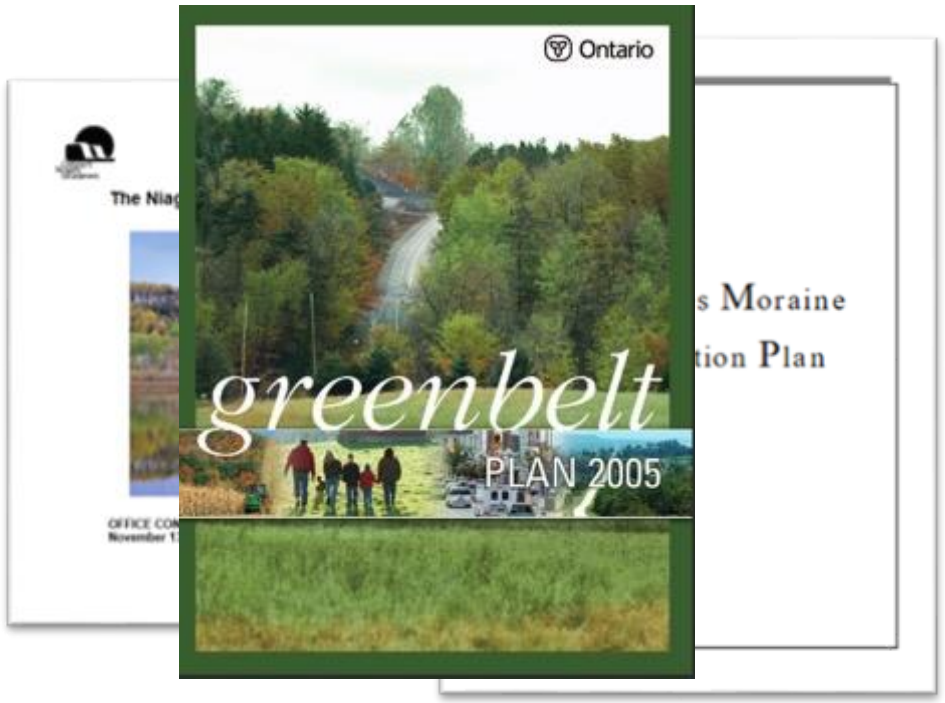
- Provincial Legislation (Planning Act & others)
- Nesting of Policy
  - Provincial Policy Statement 2014
  - Regional/County Official Plans
  - Local Municipal Official Plans
- Several key Provincial Agencies involved (MMAH, MOECP, CA's)
- Minimal Federal Involvement

Key Planning Issues in the Greater Golden Horseshoe - 'Complete Communities' with Protection of Key Natural Assets

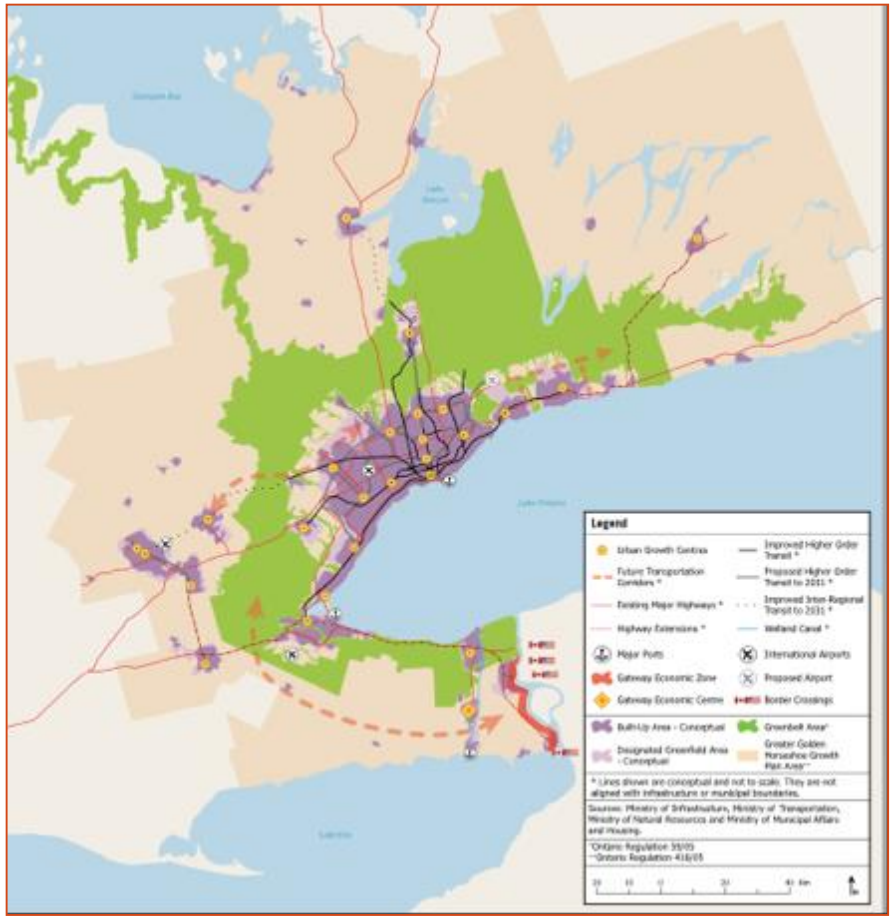
- **The current planning circumstances:**
  - Relatively high urban densities
  - Some municipalities - very sound policies
  - A relatively high acceptance of the need for planning
  - High capability farmlands in the area
  - Urban intensification, downtown renewal efforts, etc.
  - A strong Provincial-led system

Planning for the Greater Golden Horseshoe – Provincial Policy & Detailed ‘Places to Grow’ and not grow Plans





Greenbelt Plan Components



Greenbelt Area protects 1.8 million acres of land (2* larger than Long Island) and includes:

- Niagara Escarpment Plan Area;
- Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan Area; and
- Protected Countryside Areas.

Extends 200 miles in length and 50 miles wide

Greenbelt Plan Functions

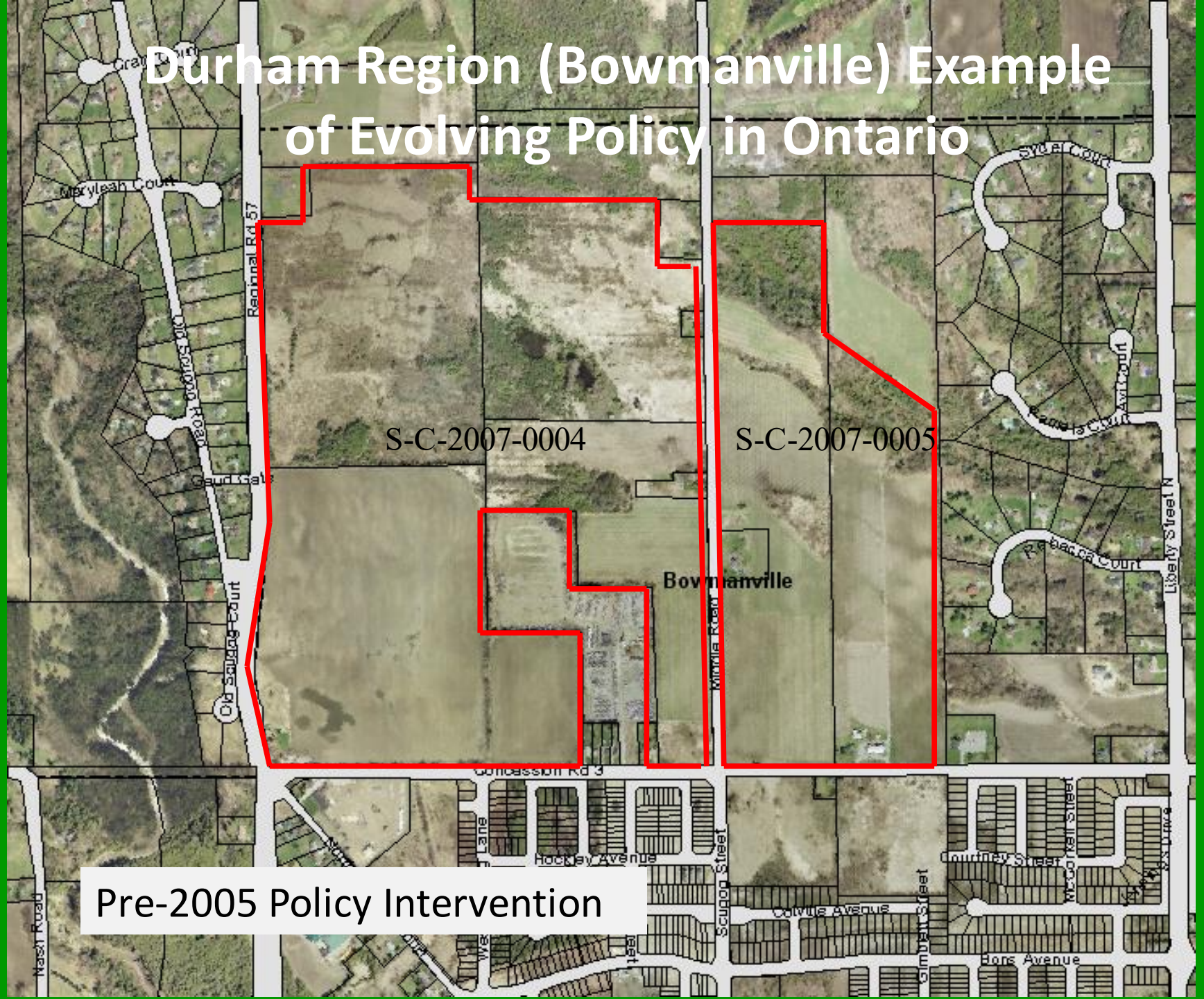
The Greenbelt is a broad band of permanently protected land which:

- *Protects against the **loss and fragmentation of the agricultural land base** and supports agriculture as the predominant land use;*
- *Gives permanent protection to the **natural heritage and water resource systems** that sustain ecological and human health . . . ; and*
- *Provides for a **diverse range of economic and social activities** associated with rural communities, agriculture, tourism, recreation and resource uses.*

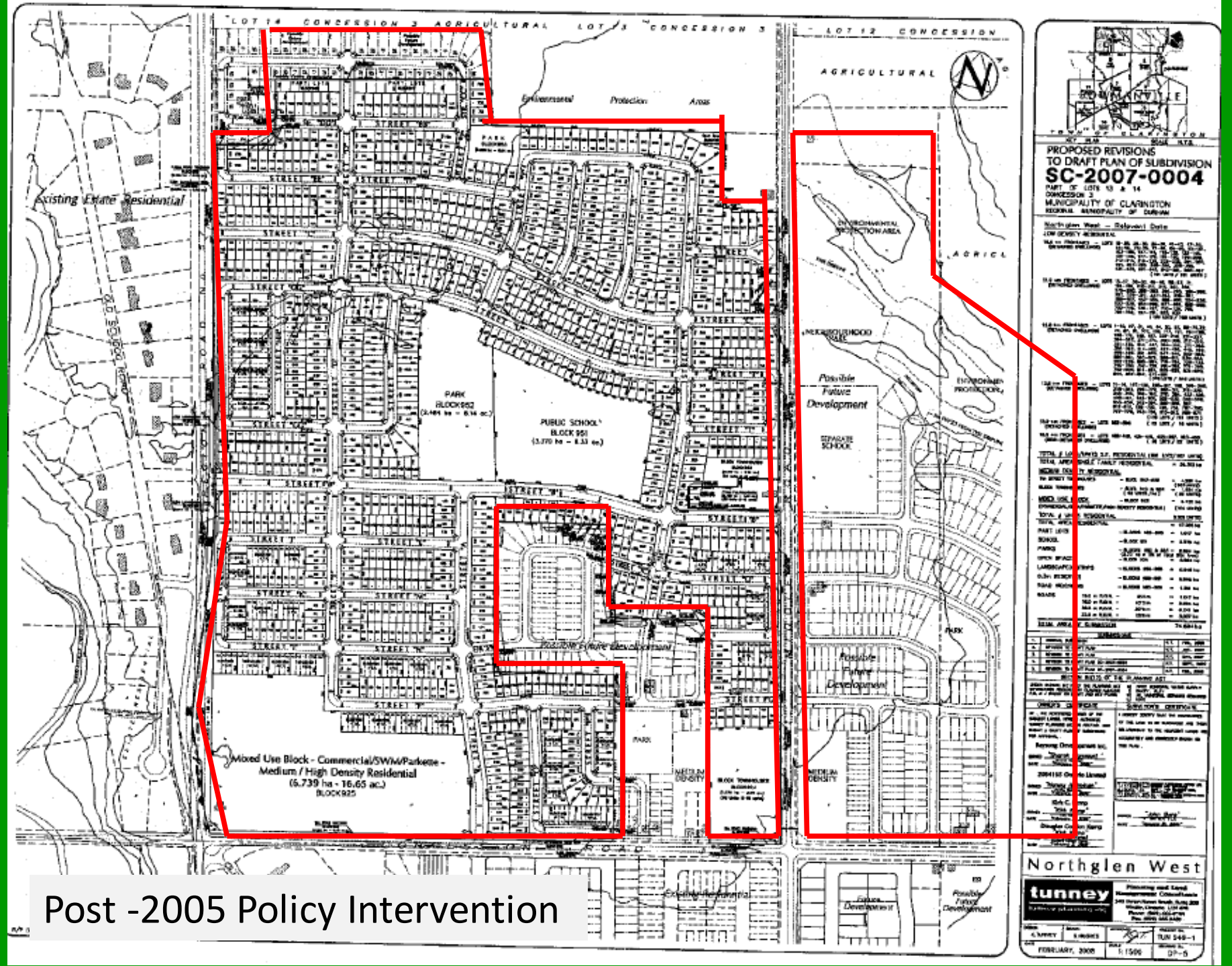
How is the Greenbelt Plan Implemented & What Are Some Associated Impacts?

- Policy embedded in local Official Plans; reviewed every 10 years
- Local plans need to ‘conform’ with provincial direction
- Impacts include:
  - Density in urban centres gradually rising
  - Development patterns around the GGH have changed

Durham Region (Bowmanville) Example of Evolving Policy in Ontario



Pre-2005 Policy Intervention



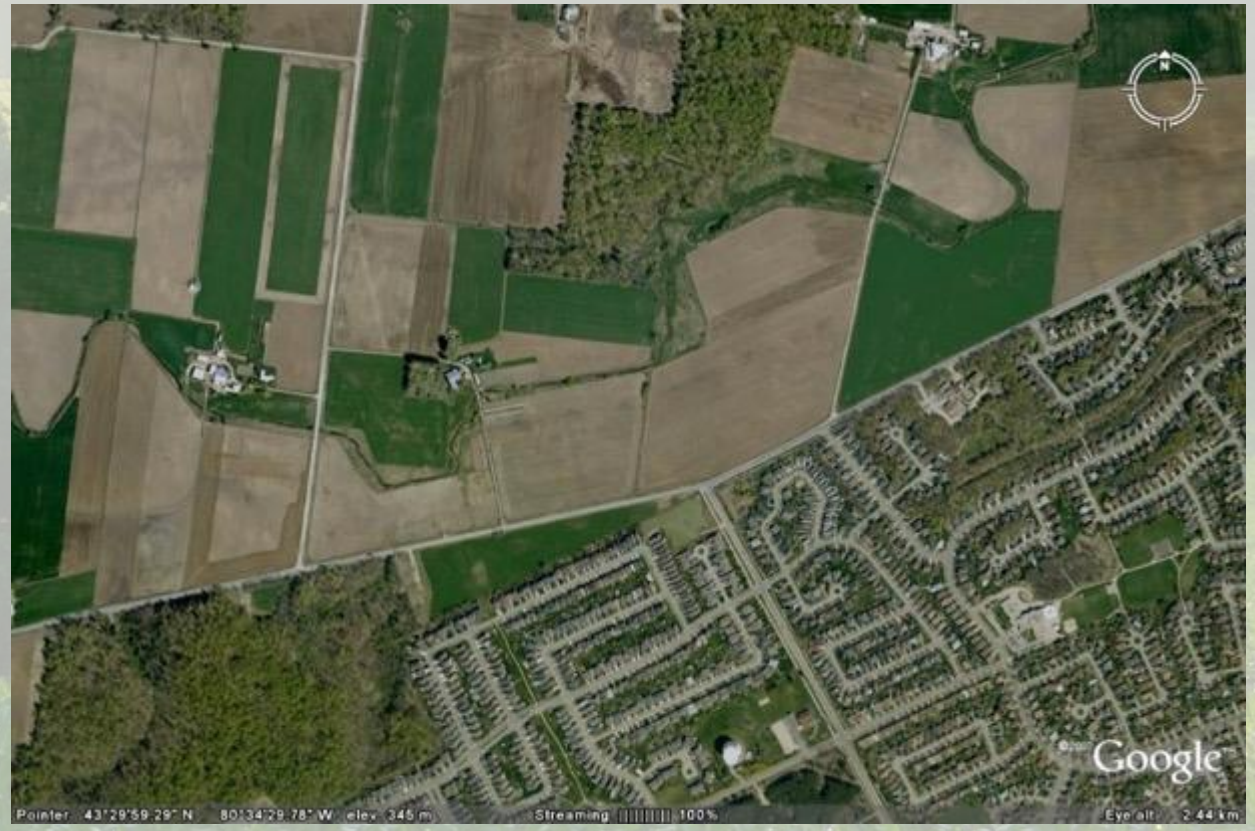
Post -2005 Policy Intervention

So… 14 years later . . .

How effective is government policy and more specifically, the Greenbelt Plan in reducing development demands on agricultural lands?

Measuring Farmland Loss in the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Starting Premise

We are challenged by the absence of data to accurately document changes to farmland availability over time



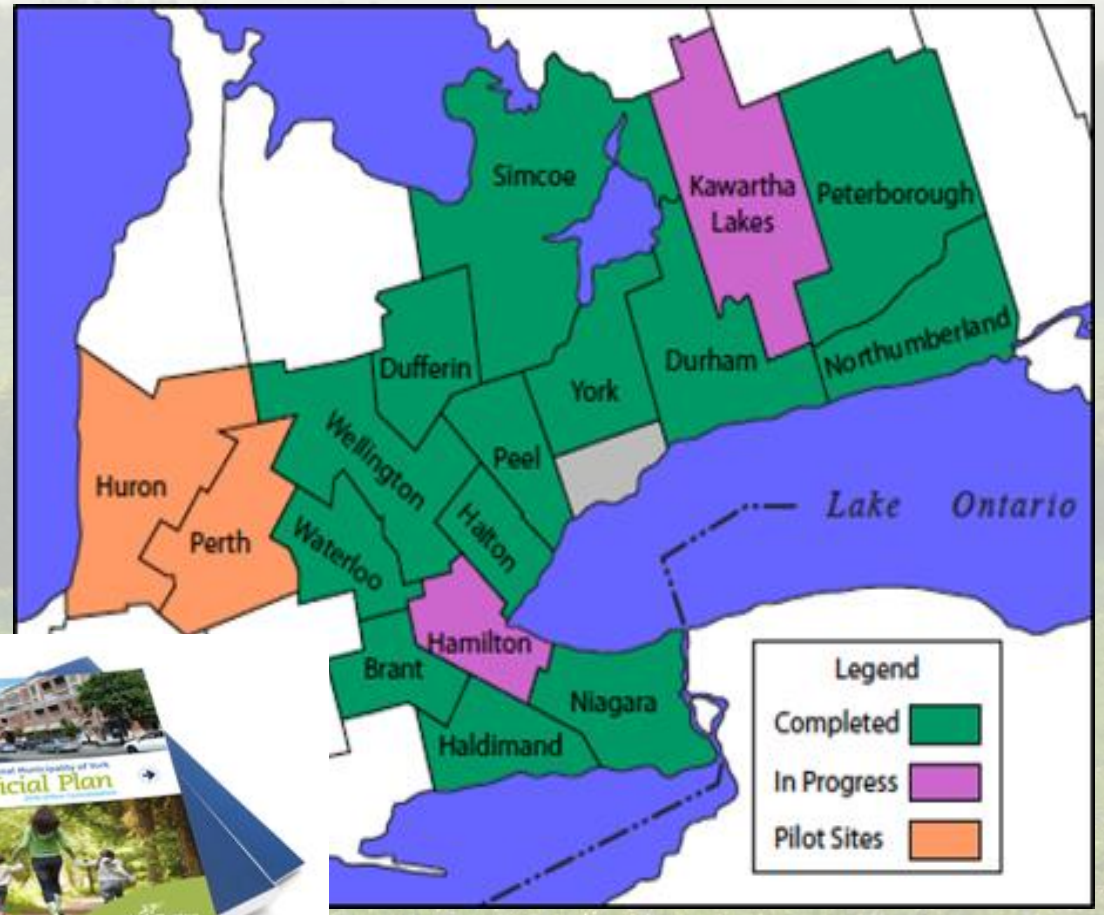
Agri-Food and Rural Link
A program of the OMAFRA – U of G Partnership
Mobilizing Agri-Food and Rural Research Knowledge

Existing Farmland Availability Tracking Methods Come With Challenges

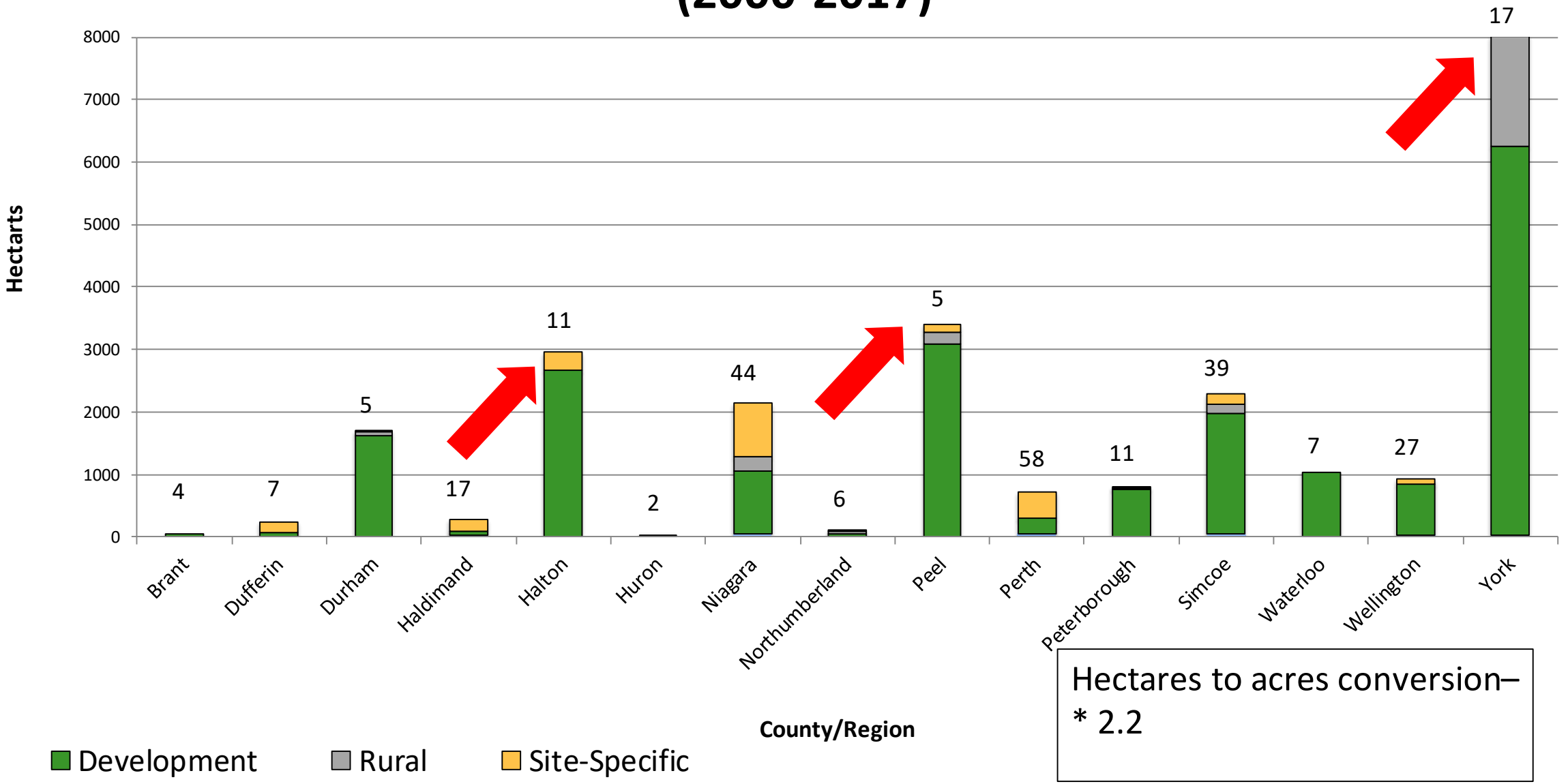
- Most means of measuring farmland loss (such as the Census or Aerial imagery) only measure loss after it has actually happened
- There is a timeline delay between when planning approvals are given, and actual development occurs within the fringes of communities (Official Plan Amendments)

Measuring Farmland Loss within the GGH: Research Method

- Tracked municipal Official plan amendments, measuring prime agricultural land designation changes (urban expansion, other non-agricultural land uses).
- Totals by year, by municipality, 2000 – 2017
- Analysis of ag land lost compiled for pre/post 2005 provincial plan policy implementation

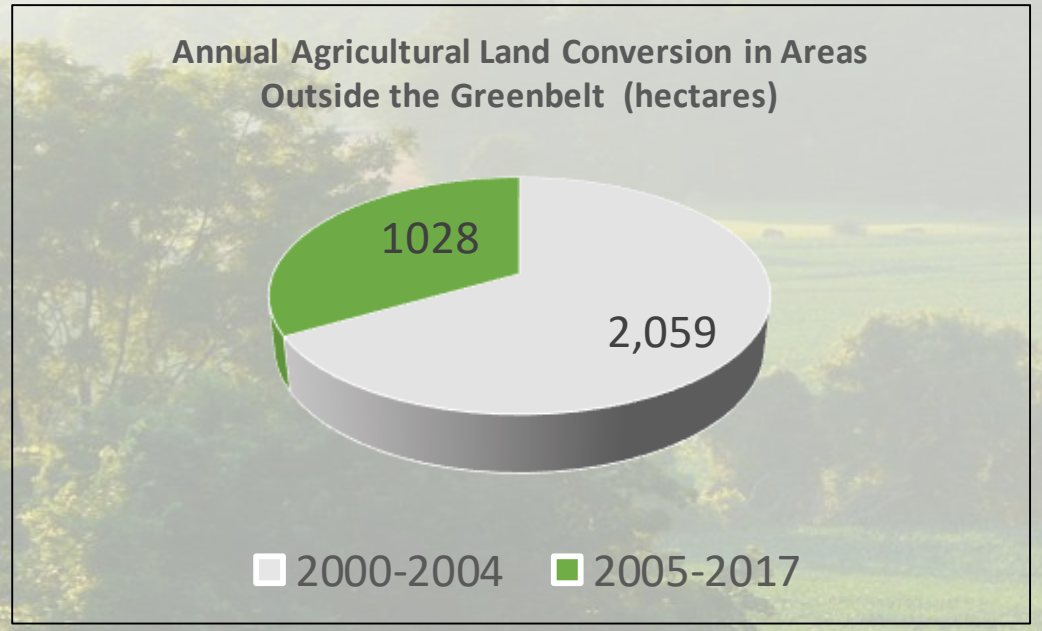


Prime Agricultural Land Re-designation by County/Region (2000-2017)

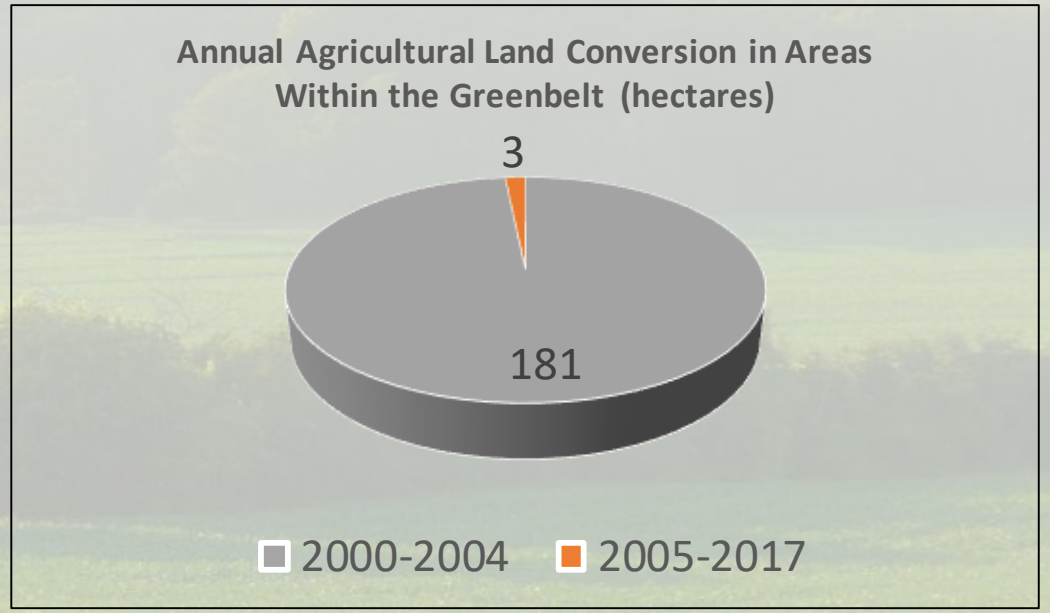


Hectares to acres conversion– * 2.2

GGH Municipality Agricultural Land Loss Totals, Areas within/outside the Greenbelt (annual averages)



General Provincial Policy (PPS) Impacts on Ag Land Loss

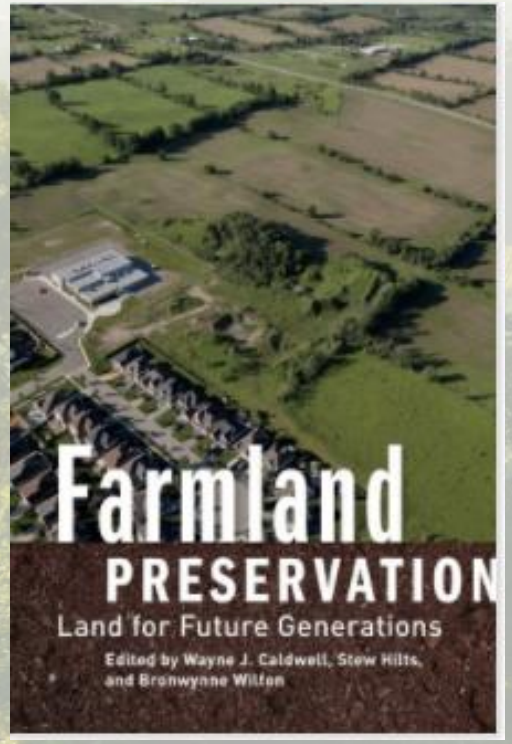


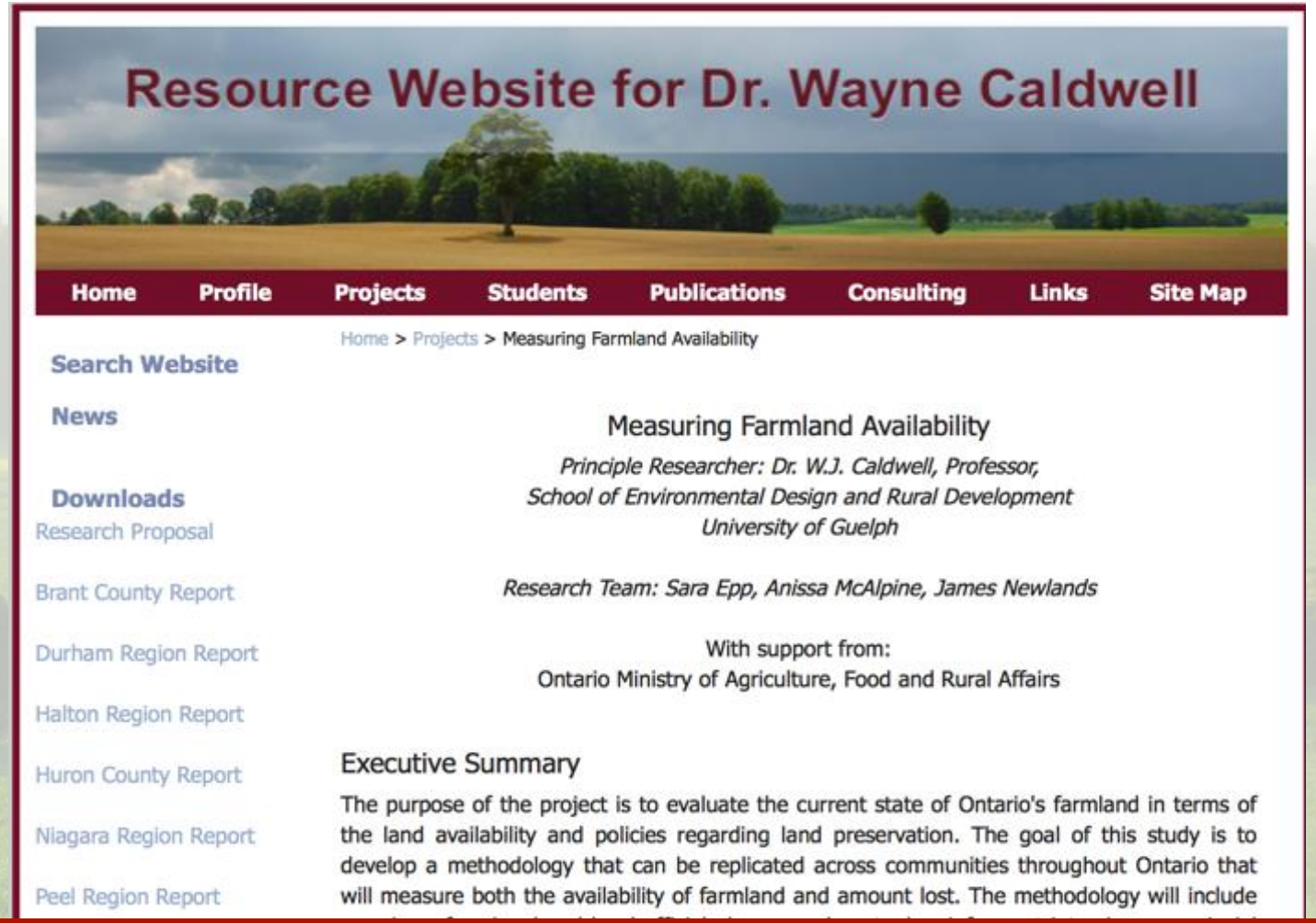
Greenbelt Provincial Policy Impacts on Ag Land Loss

Summary – Provincial Gov't Policy, more specifically the Greenbelt Policy has aided in reducing the loss of prime agricultural lands within the Toronto-centred region (GGH) of Ontario, Canada

Thank You

Research results: www.waynecaldwell.ca





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