

Addressing On-Farm Housing Challenges: Greenbelt Foundation's New Report Offers Practical Solutions

BY THE GREENBELT FOUNDATION

Housing affordability and availability are no longer confined to urban centres. Rural and agricultural communities now face similar if not more acute and unique challenges. These housing challenges pose a real risk to the long-term viability of agricultural and agrifood — one of the province's most essential economic sectors.

Agriculture is a cornerstone of Ontario's economy, contributing nearly \$50 billion to provincial GDP and employing 10 per cent of the workforce. Ontarians also benefit from a safe and secure source of local food with 60 per cent of food produced and consumed locally. Ontario's Greenbelt contains some of the most productive agricultural land in Ontario while being located next to the country's largest food processing sector and consumer market. It is also situated in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, a region which is experiencing tremendous growth pressures. We need to find housing solutions that effectively balance where residential growth should and should not occur while protecting and supporting a viable agricultural sector and economy.

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The Greenbelt Foundation's recent report, *Housing Needs and Actions for the Agricultural Sector in Rural Greenbelt*

Communities, brings this issue into focus. The report explores how current housing policies and shortages are affecting farm families, agricultural workers, and the rural economy. An advisory committee of

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subject matter experts was established to provide guidance throughout the research process, ensuring that the recommendations addressed the needs of various stakeholders. The findings provide recommendations for rural communities in the Greenbelt and across Ontario with significant agricultural operations and economies to meet housing demands by supporting the essential connection between housing and agricultural viability, the future growth of the industry, and carry important implications for planners, policymakers, and municipalities.

In Ontario's largest urban region experiencing high-growth pressures, the Greenbelt report uniquely addresses the need to protect farmland, support food production and a viable agricultural economy, as well as help shape urban growth. The areas is home to the province's only two specialty



This Barndominium/house is an example of an Additional Residential Unit (ARU) which would provide an innovative solution. The two-story, 1000-sq-ft building is attached to an existing barn/shed and supports transition and succession planning for farm families.

crop areas – the Holland Marsh and the Niagara Tender Fruit and Grape Area – whose fertile soils and unique climate conditions allow Greenbelt farmers to grow crops that can't be found commercially anywhere else.

“...the Greenbelt's \$4.1 billion annual agriculture economy...”


Ensuring the Greenbelt's \$4.1 billion annual agriculture economy continues to thrive also requires addressing the increasing and emerging housing needs of farm families and workers of agriculture and agri-businesses. Housing shortages are intensifying in rural communities, threatening the viability of farm operations and growth opportunities within the broader agri-food and rural economy. The sustainability of this sector depends on something often overlooked: access to affordable, appropriate housing.

In case studies across Durham Region, Niagara Region, and Huron County, a consistent message emerged. When housing options are limited or unsuitable, farm operations struggle to attract and retain workers, farm succession becomes more difficult, and rural


communities lose economic stability. These case studies also demonstrate that policies must respond to the needs of the local area, and one type of housing solution does not work in all areas of the province. The housing needs for agricultural workers in the speciality crop area in Niagara Region are very different than those in Durham and policy must reflect this.

For planners seeking regional solutions to the housing crisis, this issue offers both a challenge and an opportunity. The report outlines several priority areas for action:

- Preserve and strengthen policies that allow Additional Residential Units (ARUs) on farms to meet the housing needs of both farm families and agri-business workers.
- Promote flexible housing types that can be delivered quickly and cost effectively. These include modular homes, tiny homes, and accommodations for seasonal or temporary workers.
- Create a rural infrastructure strategy that identifies where investment is most needed, clarifies options for servicing (including private systems where appropriate), and aligns with planning objectives.



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- Ensure agricultural housing needs are integrated into municipal housing and agriculture plans. Local planning decisions should reflect the realities of farm life and the demands of rural economies.
- Encourage gentle intensification within existing rural settlement areas through thoughtful housing development and infrastructure investment.

This is not only a rural housing issue — it is also a question of economic development, land-use planning, and food security. Supporting housing for agricultural workers and rural residents helps ensure the long-term resilience of Ontario’s agricultural system, while contributing to broader goals of sustainable regional growth.

Planners have a critical role to play in bridging the gap between rural and urban policy. By expanding the focus of housing strategies to include rural communities, planning professionals can help create a more balanced, connected, and productive future for all of Ontario. To learn more, visit www.greenbelt.ca/rural_housing. 



The Greenbelt Foundation is committed to promoting awareness and education about Ontario’s Greenbelt. To this end we occasionally publish research and general interest papers that explore our three program areas: viable agriculture and viticulture; vibrant rural communities; and a restored and protected natural environment. The report was prepared by Caldwell Consulting with contributing authors **Wayne Caldwell, PHD, FCIP, RPP, Denise Van Amersfoort, MSC, MCIP, RPP, Shanley Weston, MSC, and Regan Zink, PHD, (Candidate)**, as well as **Shelley Petrie**, Director, Programs, Research & Policy for the Greenbelt Foundation.