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# Ontario may expand Greenbelt to protect water supply

Ontario is studying the impact of development on water sources in seven areas, from Simcoe County to Niagara.





Ontario's Greenbelt surrounding the Greater Golden Horseshoe protects 810,000-hectares of now looking at expanding the belt by another 345,000 hectares. (CARLOS OSORIO / TORON

By **TESS KALINOWSKI** Real Estate Reporter  
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The Ontario government is looking at expanding the 810,000-hectare environmentally protected Greenbelt around the Toronto region in a bid to protect clean water supplies from encroaching urbanization and climate change.

The government is [studying seven areas](#) totalling about 345,000 hectares, from Simcoe County to Niagara, to assess whether they warrant the Greenbelt designation that would limit development in environmentally sensitive areas.

New boundaries would be decided once the study is complete, says the government.

The move is overdue, say environmentalists and politicians, who are trying to keep up with the urban sprawl that is taxing the infrastructure, farmland and water sources in those places.

Homebuilders say buyers have been priced out of the city in part by provincial land use restrictions, sending them to more affordable places in Simcoe and Wellington counties and adding to the environmental pressures there.

But only about 20 per cent of the land available for development in the existing Greenbelt has been used up, so expanding the protected zone doesn't impact housing, said Municipal Affairs Minister Bill Mauro.

"This isn't an exercise about restricting growth. It's about how and where we will grow," he said on Thursday.

Mauro cited projections for 4 million more people in the region by 2041.

"We understand that there are significant population pressures coming. We need planning documents and policies that will manage that growth as much as we are able," he said.

The province has launched a 90-day consultation period on a study of wetlands, streams, rivers and moraines in Waterloo, Wellington, Brant, Simcoe and Dufferin counties. The northwest area of the Greater Golden Horseshoe is expected to face particular growth pressure, said Mauro.

A coalition of environmentalists called ProtectOurWater wants the province to expand the study area and establish a 600,000-hectare "bluebelt" that would include other [vulnerable areas](#) in Wellington County, key watersheds in the east and along the south shore of Lake Ontario.

The province has been aware of the need for water protections for more than a decade, said Margaret Prophet, executive director of the Simcoe County Greenbelt Coalition. Signs of environmental deterioration are so commonplace that people take water restrictions as normal.

Beach advisories triggered by high e-coli levels in the lakes have increased 250 per cent since 2007.

"Stream health, stream temperatures, forest cover have all been on a declining trend. Water quality in some areas where it's more urbanized has decreased more quickly than areas where it's less urbanized," said Prophet, who is urging the Liberals to act before the provincial election in June.

"We're in a situation where action was needed 10 years ago. If we couldn't have done it 10 years ago, we needed to do it today."

Mauro would not commit to a timeline.

"I won't speculate on whether it will be finalized before or after an election," he said.

Joe Vaccaro, CEO of the Ontario Home Builders' Association, said the government needs to create detailed maps and apply scientific data to its study of environmental sensitivities in relationship to urban areas.

Planning policies already protect water and the environment, and development helps pay for the infrastructure needed in growth areas, he said.

“When new communities are being approved and new housing is coming on stream, a number of the water resources are already being protected through those processes,” said Vaccaro.

Springwater Township Mayor Bill French likes the provincial plan to study Greenbelt expansion in his area north of Barrie, south of Wasaga Beach.

“We have concerns in our township because there’s a proposal to effectively build a new city on the edge of Barrie of up to 30,000 people,” he said.

“It’s too bad the study wasn’t done prior to those approvals because it requires all fresh water and its effluent to be dumped into the Minesing wetlands and that may be a serious long-term problem that’s not sustainable,” said French.

“The growth has happened so quickly we haven’t seen the resulting damages to the environment. There are acres of natural heritage, farmland and forest — they’re automatic recharge areas for water. All the forestry generates oxygen. When you start taking that out of play, you’re going to have a long-term impact.”



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