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Ontario's greenbelt a model for the world Toronto-area protected zone earns high marks for its vastness and for the strong government support it has

MARTIN MITTELSTAEDT ENVIRONMENT REPORTER The loss of prime agricultural land near cities due to urban sprawl is bemoaned the world over as a modern blight.

But a solution may be at hand, for which Toronto should be recognized as a world leader: greenbelts, or farmland and environmentally sensitive land that has been officially made off limits to developers.

A study being released today says the zone of protected land around Toronto is not only one of the largest greenbelts in the world, but is also superior to ones in North America and Europe.

"Ontario's greenbelt is positioned to be the most successful and most useful greenbelt in the world," concluded the study, compiled by the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy, a Toronto-based think tank.

In making the assessment, the institute looked in detail at B.C.'s agricultural land reserve, one of the first efforts to curb sprawl in North America; Oregon's urban growth boundary; the unusual greenbelt that Germany is developing in the former no-man's land along the Iron Curtain; and the famed greenbelts around London and near Amsterdam.

It dismissed as a "failure" the greenbelt around the Ottawa region assembled by the National Capital Commission, suggesting it has facilitated rather than hindered urban sprawl.

The study will be submitted to the province as part of a consultation process by the ministry of municipal affairs on ways municipalities near Toronto can have some of their remaining rural countryside included in the greenbelt.

Many greenbelts are under threat because of pressure for housing, roads and other urban uses, but the case in Ontario is the opposite.

The province has told developers hoping to have the tracts removed from the greenbelt to take a hike, and that its current boundaries are fixed, even if real estate companies are willing to trade land into the greenbelt elsewhere to maintain its size.

"My goal and my mantra that drives me is that we're going to be doing nothing but expanding the greenbelt," Municipal Affairs Minister Jim Watson said in an interview.

With that goal in mind, the government is embracing municipalities that are interested in having more land covered by the greenbelt, established in 2005 by

the Ontario government. It intends to issue a directive by July detailing the steps necessary to have the province agree to expand protected areas. Guelph and Oakville have said they're interested, and other municipalities have informally approached the government, although Mr. Watson was unwilling to identify them.

The greenbelt includes the world-renowned Niagara Escarpment, a ribbon of limestone cliffs that snakes across Southern Ontario from the Niagara Falls area to Tobermory on Georgian Bay, along with farmland and an expanse of bucolic rolling countryside north of Toronto known locally as the Oak Ridges Moraine, created by debris deposited by glaciers as they melted at the end of the last ice age.

Although urban sprawl and the loss of productive farmland are occurring almost everywhere in the world, greenbelts are a "relatively rare" tool for dealing with the problem, said Maureen Carter-Whitney, a researcher for the institute who conducted the study. It was commissioned by the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, a non-profit organization funded by the province that was established to promote agriculture in the greenbelt and safeguard its ecological features. Ms. Carter-Whitney's comparison gave high marks to Ontario's greenbelt because it has tough legislative protection, strong support from government, and covers a large area.

One concern with greenbelts is that they could promote even greater sprawl if development hops over the protected zone, creating longer commutes and wasting just as much farmland. Those who back greenbelts hope they encourage more efficient and intensive land use within current urban boundaries.

In Toronto's case, such leapfrogging is happening as development moves north to areas of Simcoe County around Barrie, but the trend has been observed frequently enough elsewhere to be viewed as a legitimate threat to this system of land conservation.

"That's been seen to be an issue in the United Kingdom around the London greenbelt," Ms. Carter-Whitney said. "That is one reason people are hoping an expansion of the [Ontario] greenbelt would be useful" by making such leapfrogging more difficult.

The study said B.C.'s agricultural land reserve has had success in saving farmland from development. While the quantity of agricultural land being converted to urban uses in Canada more than doubled from 1971 to 2001, B.C. had no net loss over a roughly comparable period, 1974 to 2003, although some prime cropland was developed and replaced with less productive farmland. Ms. Carter-Whitney said greenbelts should be considered in other areas of Canada facing sprawl, with Calgary a prime candidate.

Farmers are potential losers from greenbelts because developers won't pay top dollar for tracts that can't be converted to urban uses, yet they have to cover most of the costs of preserving land for society.

The study says farmers should be compensated "financially for implementing environmental stewardship activities that benefit everyone." As well, governments need to encourage the consumption of food grown in the greenbelt through farmers markets and promoting crops that appeal to Canada's growing visible minority population.

The Netherlands has tried to brand food grown in its greenbelt, known as the Green Heart, and Canada should do likewise, the report said.

"Steps should be taken to ensure that farmland in the greenbelt stays productive so that the area can continue to provide a secure local food source in the future," the study said.