Introduction and Research Goals

This research is part of a larger project measuring farmland loss within the Greater Golden Horseshoe, a region in Southern Ontario. The goal of this study was to develop a way to measure the amount of farmland converted to non-farm land through changes to county/region official plans. This study also explores if the Greenbelt Act (2005) was successful in discontinuing development within the Greenbelt area. The Greenbelt Act enables the creation of the Greenbelt Plan. This plan protects 1.8 million acres of environmentally sensitive agricultural land in the Golden Horseshoe from urban development.

This research examines:

- How much farmland is being lost to non-farm development?
- Has the Greenbelt Act halted the development of farmland?
- What policy changes are needed to better protect farmland?

Background

The future of agriculture in Ontario is dependent on a stable land base and accurate data on the availability of farmland. This land base is often under pressure from urbanizing communities and other resource activities. The Greenbelt Act has protected some prime agricultural land within Ontario, however, there is a lack of data to document changes in the amount of farmland in this area over time. In order to ensure that farmland is available, the current land use base must be measured and the quantity of land being lost to development must be determined. Currently, there is no organized or standard approach to measure farmland loss. The data collected from this study will provide an accurate and current account of prime agricultural land that is being lost within the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Methods

This project created a new method to measure the amount of prime agricultural land being converted to non-farm land uses. This method included the review of official plan changes within Wellington County, documenting any changes that converted agricultural land to other land uses (site specific, rural or development). This research occurred on-site, within the Wellington County Planning Department and included the review of every official plan amendment between 2000 and 2014. Planning staff were interviewed to provide clarification on files and to review a summary of the study findings.

Limitations

One of the limitations identified through this research was how different regions/counties term ‘agricultural land’ differently. For example, Wellington County categorizes agriculture as Prime Agricultural Areas and Secondary Agricultural Areas, while other study regions used a generic Agriculture or Rural classification, that permits agricultural activities. This variability in official plan classifications complicated the review of official plan changes, but also highlighted a challenge within the planning system.

Conclusion

In comparison to the case studies completed, Wellington County converted the least amount of prime agricultural land to non-farm land uses. The amount of prime farmland converted to non-farm land uses is consistent with growth pressures in Wellington County. Measuring the amount of farmland converted to non-farm land uses through official plan changes has provided accurate and consistent data for Wellington County and the other study sites. The Greenbelt Plan has successfully stopped the development on some prime agricultural land. Between 2005 and 2014 no farmland within the Greenbelt area was converted to non-farm land uses, demonstrating the success of the Greenbelt Act.

Research Findings:

Key findings:

- Between 2000 and 2014 Wellington County redesignated a total of 898 hectares of prime agricultural land to non-farm land uses (Figure 1)
- Approximately 71% of this farmland was converted for urban area expansions (Figure 1)
- Site specific conversions allowed the development of a landscape materials sales yard, private residences, a golf course and a flour mill/ grain elevator, but the Prime Agricultural Area designation were retained
- As a proportion of the area of census farms, only 0.4% of prime farmland in Wellington County was converted to non-farm land uses (Figure 2)

References

“Preserving farmland, our most strategic resource, preserves the tools necessary for sustainable farming and ensures a local food source.”

FARMING OUR FUTURE

Measuring Farmland Conversion in Wellington County

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