



Peter Lambrick, director with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and Chairman of the GTA Agricultural action committee, is seen taking a break from harvesting soya beans.
Jennifer Roberts for The Globe and Mail

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An urbanite invasion and a losing policy battle are pushing animal farmers out of the 2-million acre area near Toronto

One of the most unfriendly places for animal farmers in Ontario is the region designed to be one of the best: the 2-million acre swath of protected land that makes up the province's Greenbelt.

Ontario's Greenbelt is the largest protected area of its kind in the world. But animal agriculture is disappearing from the area so rapidly that it is having a negative impact on the local food system, according to University of Guelph researchers who are charting the exodus of livestock farmers from the area.

The culprits, researchers say, are a tag-team duo: encroaching urbanites repulsed by the less romantic aspects of animal farming and environmentalists who are winning a policy battle over whether to "pickle-jar" protected land or farm it.

Greenbelts all over the world have become sites of struggle between conservationists and agriculturalists. But the imbalance the tension has created in Ontario will only get worse without a new, pro-farm greenbelt policy, said lead researcher Harry Cummings.

"We need to make it [the greenbelt] farmer friendly. It can't just be a place that urban residents look on to go for a walk in the countryside or farmers are going to continue to abandon agriculture in the Greenbelt," he said. "We're going to have to deal with this ... or it [workable land] will be gone."

The move away from the Greenbelt by farmers increases transport distance to market. It could also result in relocating to land that isn't as good for farming as the Greenbelt.

The University of Guelph research, sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs

and based on agricultural census data collected by Statistics Canada in 2001 and 2006, shows declines in several areas of mainstream livestock farming that are steeper than the provincial averages for the same time period.

The number of hog farms in the Greenbelt decreased by 27 per cent in the Greenbelt versus 11 per cent province-wide; Greenbelt beef farms decreased 24 per cent versus 13 per cent across Ontario while the number of Greenbelt dairy farms dropped 5 per cent more than the provincial average. Prof. Cummings said that while some of the reductions are due to farm consolidation or farmer retirement, interviews conducted with several groups of farmers showed a lack of public and policy support for animal production weigh heavily in farmers' decisions to pack up and move elsewhere.

"It's difficult to do agriculture adjacent to an area without public support," Prof. Cummings said. "You can't take your tractors out on the road for fear of an accident. You can't spread manure on your field without a neighbour complaining. There's certainly been an attack on industrial agriculture ... If you're a young farmer, you're going to go somewhere else rather than stay close to Toronto unless we can find a policy framework to make it attractive for you to stay," he said.

For many, discussion of such a policy has come too late.

Peter Lambrick, a Halton Region farmer and director with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture who also chairs the GTA Agricultural Action Committee, knows several farmers who have moved off the Greenbelt to be "amongst their own rather than being in this near-urban situation where you have ... total disregard for farmers," he said.

"We are starting to feel that the government looks at the Greenbelt as being park-like and have forgotten that for those of us who have got to try to make a living here, increased regulation doesn't make that any easier."

By "increased regulation" Mr. Lambrick is referring to environmental and heritage policies that are popular with local governments across the Greenbelt aiming to conserve natural environments by restricting certain land-use practises, such as building near on-farm wood lots.

To conserve trees on those lots, farmers would build sheds near them to avoid building on more fertile parts of their land.

But new Greenbelt rules that limit building in proximity to wood lots, Mr. Lambrick said, have placed restrictions on farmers' ability to decide how to apportion and even work their own high-value land, which in some parts has been deemed untouchable.

Those policies have created a dynamic some argue seems counter-intuitive to the objectives of the Greenbelt.

"If you put parcels of land into pickle jars, you're not really getting at the heart of the problem," said Geoff Cape, the director of Evergreen, a national not-for-profit environmental group that promotes sustainability. "The heart of the problem is the way we, as humans, behave ... you only get that shift by interacting with the land."

To make high-margin livestock farming viable for local farmers, Mr. Cape said Greenbelt advocates - and policy makers - may need to develop a comfort level around industrial farming on a scale large enough to allow farmers a sustainable living but small enough to avoid the "complete bastardization of the food system" that activists attribute to industrial farm operations.

"Finding a way to thread the needle on the urbanizing edges of our cities is enormously challenging," said Will Rogers, President of the Trust for Public Land, a land conservation group that works with communities in the U.S. to implement Greenbelt programs.

"Food is incredibly important. We have to figure out a way to support our agriculture, but also how to support other uses of our spaces."

From one perspective, heavy-handed agricultural policy is not one of them.

Burkhard Mausberg, president of the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, said the act that created the Greenbelt had "no ambitions" to support farmland in the way researchers are suggesting it ought. And the data the study is based on is outdated given the Greenbelt was not officially designated until 2005, meaning that in reality, the situation may not be as dire as it seems.

"I look at the future with some hope that the right pieces of policy are in place and that we have successful farming in the Greenbelt for years come," he said, adding that farmers need to toughen their resolve against complaining urbanites. "If I were a farmer, I'd just fight back."