



NATIONAL

# ONTARIO'S GREENBELT SCANDAL

– PREMIER FORD REVERSES HIS GOVERNMENT'S CONTROVERSIAL DECISION



In late September, Ontario Premier Doug Ford declared that the government was reversing its decision to develop parts of the province's Greenbelt. That was a big win for environmentalists, First Nations, and opposition parties who had objected to the government's proposal.

## ABOUT THE GREENBELT

The Ontario Greenbelt was created in 2005 to protect rich agricultural lands, fertile wetlands, and the natural habitat of resident species from urban sprawl. It is an 8100 square-kilometre region, larger than Prince Edward Island. It stretches from Bruce Peninsula in the north, where Lake Huron and Georgian Bay meet, to the Niagara Escarpment in the south. In the east it starts at Halton Region, home to Burlington and other cities. It goes west to Northumberland

County on the northern shore of Lake Ontario.

The Greenbelt encompasses the Golden Horseshoe. That's the name for one of the fastest growing urban areas in North America. Nearly eight million Canadians live in the region, or about 20 percent of the nation's population as a whole. With Toronto at its centre, it covers some 10,100 square kilometres.

## A CHANGE OF PLANS

Mr. Ford promised that his government wouldn't develop the Greenbelt when he first ran for election in 2018. But he also pledged to build 1.5 million homes before 2031 to address a housing emergency in the province. Since then, the pressure to build homes has only increased due to rapid population growth.

So last year, Mr. Ford said he had no option but to build in

the Greenbelt. The proposed development would remove about 3000 hectares from the protected area. In exchange, nearly 4000 hectares would be added to the Greenbelt in other areas.

## DID YOU KNOW?

In a recent 12-month period, Ontario's population grew by over 500,000.

Environmentalists were quick to oppose the plan. They argued that swapping acreage that is highly vulnerable for land that is less at risk runs counter to the Greenbelt's purpose.

"This idea that you can destroy part of the Greenbelt and then somehow make up for it – it's just not the way the natural world works," said one analyst. "When you start to take chunks out of the Greenbelt, you

## DEFINITIONS

**ESCARPMENT:** a steep slope that separates an area of high ground from an area of lower ground

**HECTARE:** a unit of area equal to 10,000 square metres and approximately 2.471 acres



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compromise the **integrity** of an **ecosystem**. That's so damaging.”

Opponents also argued that the land swap wasn't necessary – and a **task force** formed by Mr. Ford's own government agreed. In 2022, it reported that there was enough land outside the Greenbelt to solve the housing shortage.

## SCANDAL!

As public outcry grew, two inquiries into the government's Greenbelt decision were launched. Their conclusions were released in August.

**Auditor General** Bonnie Lysyk's report came first. She found that before decisions were made about which Greenbelt land to remove, someone approached Ryan Amato, a key figure in the Ontario housing ministry. He was given a package. In it were recommendations on the topic from developers. Some of them had donated money to the Ontario Progressive Conservatives. With no input from unbiased experts, the government eventually accepted all but one of the builders' 15

proposals. That gave the builders access to buy 92 percent of the land taken from the Greenbelt.

Did Mr. Ford's government alert these donors that valuable land would soon be for sale? It isn't clear. But Ms. Lysyk called the government's decisions “biased” in favour of the builders. She said that people who had bought the newly freed-up lands stood to make as much as \$8.3 billion if the sites were developed.

“How the land sites were selected was not transparent, fair, or fully informed,” Ms. Lysyk wrote.

In a second report, Ontario Integrity Commissioner David Wake said that the government had violated ethics. He accused then-Minister of Housing Steven Clark of choosing to ignore **conflict-of-interest** rules.

## THE FALLOUT

Just weeks after the reports were issued, Mr. Amato resigned. Next, on September 4, Mr. Clark left his post as housing minister. Then on September 20, **cabinet** minister Kaleed Rasheed also quit. Finally, after two days of **caucus** and cabinet meetings, on

## PROTECTED FARMLANDS

Ontario's Greenbelt isn't the only one in the province. A Greenbelt was established in Ottawa in 1956. It is a 203-square-kilometre horseshoe-shaped collection of farmland, forests, and wetlands that borders the west, south, and east ends of the city.

In Quebec, the Regional Agricultural Conservation maintains an agricultural zone to protect farming that covers 63,000 square kilometres. And British Columbia's Agricultural Land Reserve prioritizes 47,000 square kilometres for farming over other non-agricultural uses.

September 21, Mr. Ford agreed not to develop the Greenbelt.

“I made a promise to you that I wouldn't touch the Greenbelt. I broke that promise. I'm very, very sorry,” the premier said.

Still, many people want a public inquiry into the whole issue.

“We can't let this reversal be a get-out-of-jail-free card for Premier Ford or his cabinet,” said Green Leader Mike Schreiner. ★

## DEFINITIONS

**AUDITOR GENERAL:** an independent officer of the government who examines government operations, finances and records

**CABINET:** a group of members of a government chosen by the leader to give advice and be responsible for its policies

**CAUCUS:** a group of people who meet to discuss a particular issue or to work together for a shared political goal

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST:** a situation in which somebody has two jobs, aims, roles, etc. and cannot treat both of them equally and fairly at the same time

**ECOSYSTEM:** all the plants and animals in a particular area, considered as a system with parts that depend on one another

**INTEGRITY:** the state of being whole and not divided

**TASK FORCE:** a group of people brought together to do a particular job, especially when there is a problem to solve



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## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Name the premier of Ontario.

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2. When was the Ontario Greenbelt created and why?

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3. How large is the protected Greenbelt region?

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4. What is the Golden Horseshoe? Where it is located and how many people live in this region?

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5. Describe the recent population growth in Ontario.

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6. What did the provincial government announce last year regarding Ontario's Greenbelt?

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7. List the two main reasons why some people were opposed to this policy reversal.

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8. Name the Ontario Auditor General.

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9. What did the Auditor General find when she investigated? Explain.

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10. What did Premier Ford announce on September 21?

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