

Rouge National Urban Park takes novel approach to agriculture

Preservationists eye conservancy trusts to safeguard future of farmlands

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This is part two of a two-part series looking at agriculture in Durham Region. Part one looked at the effects of growth on agricultural operations and part two focuses on options for preserving farmland.

PICKERING -- As irreplaceable farmland continues disappearing across the province, conservation advocates are cheering efforts to preserve arable land.

When the new Rouge National Urban Park was announced in July, conservationists praised the creation of an unbroken park system connecting the Oak Ridges Moraine to Lake Ontario. To achieve this, Parks Canada also created an entirely new park model that will integrate conservation, modern urban infrastructure and non-park uses such as agriculture.

"We see agriculture as an important element in Parks Canada's long-term vision," said Catherine Gremier, director for the Rouge National Park Initiative.

"Agriculture is a significant land use in the territory right now, and we would like to see that celebrated and promoted. It's about celebrating the agricultural heritage of the valley and promoting sustainable agriculture into the future."

Approximately 75 working farms can be found within the study area for the proposed park, constituting 60 per cent of the land base. Some of those farms are located on federal lands in northern Markham, which have been in limbo since they were expropriated for a potential airport in 1972.

The Markham lands are a just small piece of a larger chunk of land encompassing much of northern Pickering, where residents have been advocating for the creation of a land trust to preserve the area for agricultural use.

"Conservation trusts are not a new thing, they have them all over the world," said Lorne Almack, a Claremont resident and founding member of the Green Door Alliance, which advocates for a land trust.

"We don't think farmland should be in some Soviet form," Mr. Almack explained.



Rouge National Urban Park takes novel approach to agriculture. PICKERING -- Lorne Almack, a member of Land Over Landings, has been advocating for the Pickering federal lands to be turned into an agricultural trust. His own land in Claremont has been converted to a trust to ensure no future development. September 20, 2012 *Sabrina Byrnes / Metroland*

"We believe in free enterprise, we think most people would buy farms with easements registered on the title saying they could never be developed. They would be owners and stewards of the land, protecting it from urban sprawl."

Mr. Almack's own 34-hectare property in Claremont has been protected by a conservation easement to the Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

"It can never be built on, this way it will be preserved in perpetuity," Mr. Almack explained, calling land trusts "absolutely" an option to combat farmland loss.

Based out of the University of Guelph, the Ontario Farmland Trust works to protect and preserve farmland by working directly with landowners who want to see their farms permanently protected for agricultural use.

"We always say farmers are the original conservationists," said Matt Setzkorn, policy co-ordinator for OFT. "They are so closely tied to the land, their whole livelihood is invested in how they steward the land."

The organization has long seen the federal lands as a unique opportunity.

"We have a really unique scenario here where we have land that's been held by the government for so many years without any of the development pressure you see in other parts of the GTA," Mr. Setzkorn explained.

"Removing that development pressure creates a really unique opportunity with a large amount of land so close to an urban area. It's really exciting."

Mr. Setzkorn sees the move to include agriculture in the new Rouge Park as a step forward in preserving the lands, along with adjoining lands expropriated by the provincial government for a companion community, even if it is a small portion. He applauds the move as having the potential to offer security to farmers who have been working under month-to-month government leases.

"Month-to-month leases don't allow farmers any security in their land, they can't make investments such as tile drainage or other infrastructure components," he said.

"The long-term leasing idea really hasn't been done before in Ontario. We see that as really exciting because it's not only protecting a significant amount of land but also supporting the farmers and investing in relationships that will allow farming to exist alongside the protection of natural areas."

Farmland loss

- Only five per cent of Canada's land is prime agricultural land; Canada Land Inventory classes 1 through 3 signify farmland with no significant constraints for crop production
- Only 0.5 per cent of Canada's land area is Class 1 farmland, the most productive land resource, with 50 per cent of it located in southern Ontario
- Combined with southern Ontario's moderate climate, this land can produce a greater diversity of crops than anywhere else in Canada
- Ontario's agriculture and agri-food industries contribute over \$30 billion to the provincial economy annually.
- Over the past 30 years, more than two million acres of Ontario farmland has been lost to non-farm developments such as urban expansion and mineral aggregate extraction. We continue to lose more than 100 acres, or one farm, per day.
- In the GTA alone, more than 2,000 farms and 150,000 acres of farmland were lost to production between 1976 and 1996
- The amount of farmland in the GTA decreased by 600,000 acres between 1996 and 2006, including 18 per cent of Ontario's Class 1 farmland
- The best land is disappearing the fastest. Ontario's largest cities were established in rich agricultural areas, because historically we depended on this prime farmland to feed our population
- It can take thousands of years to produce one centimetre of the topsoil needed for agricultural production

Source: Ontario Farmland Trust

Mike Whittamore is the current owner of Whittamore's Farm, located on provincial lands at 8100 Steeles Ave. E. in Markham and part of the provincial lands. He says he is "cautiously optimistic" about the new park, which could allow farmers to better focus on business.

"They're talking 30- to 40-year leases, which would give farmers security, they would be able to invest in the land and have a more long-term view," he said.

"I think agriculture and conservation can live in harmony. It's a great opportunity to not only talk about conservation but also educate people about agriculture and where their food comes from."

For Mr. Almack, the collaboration is a better alternative to the land staying under its current government stewardship, but he says it doesn't go far enough.

"We're all happy to see it preserved, but it shouldn't be park land," he said. "Agricultural use should trump park uses."

The OFT hopes creative approaches to agriculture such as that in the new park will encourage people to recognize farmland as a diminishing resource and look at ways to protect it.

"I think we have to look at planning agriculture and conservation together for the sustainability of our communities across the province and otherwise," he said.

"Agricultural preservation is a solution we should be thinking about. We've already seen an interest at the local level with the federal lands, while provincially we see the greenbelt cutting through those lands. There is an interest in seeing rural lands protected for agriculture."

That interest could be spurred by the possible collaboration of farmers and Parks Canada.

"We are not an agricultural organization, we can't tell people how to farm, but by working with farmers we can help with public education, teaching people about the importance of having agricultural lands close to the city," Ms. Gremier explained.

"We see agriculture as part of the fabric of having a national urban park. It's a new concept for us, something that's never done before, so there's no comparable place anywhere in the country."