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April 2023

## Ontario's Greenbelt: The Protector of Biodiversity and the Key to Climate Resilience



Ontario's Greenbelt (Submitted by the Greenbelt Foundation).

At the heart of the bustling Greater Golden Horseshoe is the Greenbelt, a 2 million-acre protected green space featuring farmland, forests, rivers, lakes, and wetlands. The Greenbelt was established by the Ontario government in 2005 in recognition of its ecological significance. It is an invaluable natural asset that purifies our air and water, provides a home to wildlife, reduces flood risks, and supports climate resilience. Over the years, more Ontarians have come to understand the importance of the Greenbelt to local communities and the environment. However, in light of the provincial government's announcements regarding the Greenbelt, it seems that the progress toward building a greener province has stalled. Premier Ford's proposal of paving

sections of the Greenbelt to develop 50,000 houses to alleviate the housing crisis would contribute further to the already pressing issues of biodiversity loss and climate change.

Given that habitat loss is one of the greatest threats to biodiversity, the prospect of opening up Ontario's Greenbelt is alarming. Several endangered species rely on the green space for survival. A report by Ontario Nature states that "the Greenbelt is home to 78 of over 200 provincially listed species at risk in Ontario" (Ontario Nature). One species called the redbreasted dace (minnows distinguishable by their red stripe), for example, are only able to inhabit specific environments due to their sensitivity to changes in water quality. The well-protected Greenbelt provides them with clean water that is free from runoff pollutants from paved roads. Changes to their habitat would inevitably lead to a drop in their numbers. Other endangered species such as monarch butterflies, wood turtles, red-headed woodpeckers, Jefferson salamanders, American ginseng, dwarf lake iris, and lakeside daisies would also experience a population decline. Biodiversity must be protected because it is vital to supporting life on Earth. A reduction in biodiversity may lead to a trophic cascade since species are interconnected with one another in a food web. An ecosystem is like a puzzle in that it requires all of its pieces to be complete. As more pressure to expand development occurs in neighbouring areas like Durham, York and Simcoe, there is growing concern about the future state of Ontario's biodiversity.

Climate change, which is a major environmental issue in all parts of the world, would also be worsened. Trees reduce the amount of carbon emissions in the atmosphere by acting as carbon sinks. According to the Arbor Day Foundation, in one year a mature tree can "absorb more than 48 pounds of carbon dioxide" ("USDA"). They are essentially a natural way of combating climate change. However, removing trees causes them to emit carbon rather than absorb carbon. Therefore, by cutting a part of the Greenbelt, there would be increased levels of

carbon dioxide in our atmosphere and the benefits of trees would be undermined. To begin making larger strides forward in achieving the thirteenth global goal of climate action, it is necessary to preserve the Greenbelt.

Ontario's Greenbelt must be protected to conserve biodiversity and tackle climate change. Strengthening laws that ensure that protected areas are permanently protected and prioritizing the environment are steps that should be taken to prevent urban sprawl. It is natural to wonder when the government will learn to balance urbanization and the environment.

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