

There have been numerous reports in the media that suggest Ontario is losing 319 acres of farmland per day to being paved over for development.

The basis of the claim of the loss of farmland in Ontario is the comparison between 2016 Statistics Canada (StatsCan) Census of Agriculture and the 2021 census. Based on this comparison many reports state urban development is the major contributing factor to the loss of farmland in Ontario. What's being presented is misleading.

There is a significant difference in reported farmland area between the Statistics Canada Census on Agriculture Data and Municipal Property Assessment Corporation data (2021 - 2016) which shows an increase in taxable farmland in Ontario.

**It is important to recognize that for the period 2016 to 2021 the total area of a "farm" was reported in the Statistics Canada census of agriculture. This zoning would include non-tillable acres such as woodlots, wetlands, ravines, farm residence, etc.**

**Some basic research highlights that the loss of lands owned and controlled by farm operators for Agriculture (farm land) is far greater through "conservation and "changes in land tenure" than it is to "development".**

**See "Conclusion" below for more detail as to why Statistics Canada (StatsCan) data was not an ideal source for demonstrating the loss of farmland to urban development.**

**The competing** factors for total Farmland acres come from the following areas.

1. **Farmers** - expanding their operations in a more mechanized and automated agriculture era are purchasing land to maintain viability as they compete in a global market. It is common practice for a farmer, when amalgamating farm properties, to sever off surplus dwellings. In doing so they contribute to the reported change of farmland figures with the loss of the farm dwelling and the related acreage (house, barn, outbuildings)
2. **Financial investment companies** - Investment firms with portfolios of over \$400 million dollars are actively purchasing land then leasing it back to the farm operator (excluding woodland wetland and non farm areas and in some cases buildings on the farm). Statistics Canada would report a reduction in total farm area in the Census of Agriculture data since only the farm operator would report actual farmed acres. It's has been recently stated that Bonfield owns 20000 acres of farm land area in Norfolk County. There are 5 or more large investment companies purchasing farm land area to lease back to farmers through out Ontario.

3. **Ontario Farmland Trust (OFT)** - a non profit group with chapters across Ontario Land Trust receives significant funding from the Ontario *Greenlands Conservation Partnership* Fund and private donors. OFT uses Farmland Easement Agreements (CEAs) to legally protect farms permanently, without taking ownership. Ontario Farmland Trust also accepts donations of farm land and takes full ownership of significant lands across Ontario. There are another 36 Land Trust affiliated groups actively searching for and acquiring land in Ontario. Since 2020, the Ontario government's *Greenlands Conservation Partnership* program has helped protect over 430,000 acres of *private natural land* across the province. ***In 2025 alone, Ontario and its partners added nearly 700,000 acres of protected and conserved land, the largest increase in decades*** (Google search)
4. **Nature Conservancy of Canada** - a non profit group that receives funding from the *Greenlands Conservation Protection Fund* along with Federal funding partners and private donors, purchases significant natural and ecologically important properties which may include farmland located in areas zoned Agricultural. The NCC and its partners have contributed to the conservation of over **20 million hectares (about 49.4 million acres)** of land and water across Canada since its founding in 1962. In Norfolk County alone NCC owns 8000 acres of land much of it farmland purchased over the past 30 years. The Nature Conservancy groups actively purchase and acquire total farm area across the province of Ontario in regions with significant forest cover, wetlands and other significant natural areas.
5. **Conservation Authorities (CA)** – CAs own **150,000 hectares (370,658 acres)** of land in Ontario, making the CAs the second largest landowners in Ontario, after the province. Within their holdings, the CAs also manage woodlots for profit, as well as, campgrounds and tourist sites.
6. **Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC)** - a non profit organization is a Canada wide group interested in conserving wetlands found on farms and property across Ontario. They will work with other nature groups such as NCC and OFLT and private landowners. Ducks Unlimited has conserved more than 1,000,000 acres across Ontario. (Google search)
7. **Ontario Parks and Protected areas including Municipal areas:** consist of land area that may contain old growth forests, lakes rivers and wetlands, archeological sites and with cultural values, habitat for rare or endangered species. These areas make up approximately 10% of the total Province land area
8. **Ontario residents purchasing Ontario farm land.** The sheer size of today's modern farm equipment and economies of scale in agriculture make ownership of marginal farm land

areas that have small irregular shaped fields, a high percentage of Woodlots, wetlands, rocky and rolling terrain less feasible for farm operators to purchase. Non farm residents are more likely to purchase the marginal farm properties and rent back a small portion of land to farm operators or plant the remaining open farm land back into trees. These parcels remain classified as total farm area or managed forest area in MPAC data and are not lost to development. Residents may enjoy the woodlot, wetland and natural area while renting a small portion back to the farm operator.

9. **Retired farmers :**The average age of farmers has increased since the last Census. Many farmers retire on the farm property they own. The farmer may choose to rent out their crop land to farm operators. In these cases only the rented crop land portion would be declared in the Census of Agriculture survey by the farm operator. Woodlots, wetlands, hazard lands and other farm areas would remain unreported. Occasionally retired farmers may decide to plant their farm land areas into trees and apply for the Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program.
10. **Urban development:** Roads and aggregate mining, green energy (solar and wind), telecommunication towers, parks and recreation would also take a portion of the land being reported as lost farmland in Statistics Canada Census of Agriculture.

There is a huge potential for additional farmland acres to be created in the great northern clay belt area near Temiskaming Ontario. With up 16 million acres of land that have potential to establish more agricultural enterprises with products such as dairy, beef, pork and chicken along with crops such as small grains, hay, soybeans, and now even vegetables.

#### **NOTE**

***Only category 1 will report data on agriculture to Statistics Canada. This may contribute, in a minor way, to the loss of farmland total numbers by severing off surplus farm dwellings and the related farmyard, barn(s) and outbuildings.***

***Categories 2 - 10 all go unreported in Stats Can data and is a significant loss of acres of woodlots, wetlands, unworkable and other farm areas.***

***Categories 1-10 are all included in MPAC data.***

***Category 8 Due to the size of today's farms, the loss of marginal farmland and small farm ownership by farm operators is a significant factor towards the loss of total farmland area in the Stats Can data. MPAC data still reports the farmland since it is still classed as farmland or managed forest area for tax purposes and is not lost to development.***

***Crop land area has shown an increase in acres over the 2016 - 2021 census period while woodlands, wetlands and other farm areas have shown a decrease or loss in total farmland area.***

***The 2021 vs 2016 Statistics Canada Census of Agriculture data from the Western Canadian Provinces with a combined lower population than Ontario show a 600% higher loss of farmland rate than Ontario census numbers show.***

***Statistics Canada changed the definition of a farm in the 2021 census.***

#### **Change in the farm definition:**

An **important and significant conceptual change** to the main statistical unit used by *Statistics Canada's Agriculture Statistics Program* was introduced for the 2021 Census of Agriculture:

a "farm" or an "agricultural holding" (i.e. the census farm) now refers to a unit that *produces agricultural products and reports revenues or expenses for tax purposes* to the Canada Revenue Agency.

Before 2021, a "farm" was defined as an agricultural operation that produced at least one agricultural product intended for sale.

The change in the new definition may result in farms being classified differently across farm types than in previous censuses. As a result, comparisons with earlier census results should be interpreted with caution.

#### Note:

The Agricultural Census defines Total Farm Area reported here as all farmland reported by farmers completing the Census. Ag Census Total Farm Area can consider the total land owned, used and/or controlled by active farmers.

The Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) defines Total Farmland as reported here as all landed assessed for agricultural purposes even if that land is not actively farmed. MPAC total farmland should include most or all Ag Census land plus land that is not actively farmed.

#### MPAC v.s. Census of Agriculture data:

Total Farm Area including woodlots, wetlands and other farm area not owned by farm operators would be reported by MPAC as total farm area.

Any open farm area, Woodlots, Lakes Rivers and Wetlands, archaeological sites and habitat for rare endangered species being donated to or purchased by Ontario Parks, Municipalities, Nature Conservancy's and Land Trusts groups would no longer be included in Total farm area in StatsCan Census of Agriculture data.

#### MPAC Farm tax class

If your property is eligible for the Farm Property Tax Rate program MPAC will place the farmland and associated outbuildings in the farm property tax class. The landowner would be taxed at no more than 25 % of the municipalities residential tax rate.

Property owners must apply for the Farm Property Tax Class Rate Program with Agri-Corp.

Crop land area that is owned by non- farmers would be rented by farm operators however only the crop land acres being rented by the farmer operator would be reported to the Census of Agriculture while woodlots, wetlands and other farm areas not owned by the farm operator would go unreported in the Census of Agriculture data.

Only farm operators who own farmland would report "total farm area" on the portion of land they own to the Census of Agriculture.

#### Conclusions

***A claim that the loss of agricultural farm area is directly related to "development" and has doubled since the last StatsCan census of Agriculture in 2016 warrants further and thorough investigation/clarification. The Statistics Canada Census of Agriculture may accurately reflect changes in agriculture along with changes in land tenure in Ontario. The data does accurately reflect the number of acres of farmland lost to urban development.***

***MPAC and other sites represent data in a more factual overview of farmland acres, and their conversion (loss) in Ontario. MPAC would include farmland acres lost to nature conservancy groups, land trusts and lands acquired by Ontario Parks, Conservation areas, Municipalities, etc.***

#### References;

Statistics Canada website

MPAC website