

# Canada's Disappearing Farmland

**by Tanya Brouwers**

Canada is a nation of vast spaces and varied terrain. Nationwide, however, this seemingly endless land base has limited agricultural potential. In fact, 94% of Canada's lands are unsuitable for farming. Of that small percentage of land that will support agricultural endeavours only 0.5% is designated as class 1, where there are no significant limitations to farming activity. Unfortunately, due to urbanization, poor farming practices and other non-agricultural activities, this small percentage of viable farmland is shrinking at an alarming rate. Statistics Canada, for example, reported that between 1971 and 2001, over 14,000 square kilometres of our best agricultural land had been permanently lost to urban uses. Fortunately, as more individuals recognize the importance of healthy agricultural landscapes in matters of food security, recreation and habitat conservation they are asking Canada's policy makers and politicians why this precious yet limited land base is allowed to disappear.

Some might answer that it is Canada's political structure itself that lends itself perfectly to this rapid reduction of agricultural land. Federal policy initiatives, like Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Growing Forward program, emphasize the "how" of agricultural practices by focussing on those elements vital to a healthy and viable agricultural economy, specifically innovation, local need and best management practices. These programs fall short, however, in addressing the "where" of agricultural activity. Currently, it is the role of the provinces, regions and municipalities, along with a host of other non-agricultural interests, to decide whether keeping agricultural land available for production best meets "community need". Unfortunately, the competitive nature of this multi-tiered, "bottom-up" approach to farmland preservation has resulted in a nationally fragmented land use system with some provinces adopting agricultural land reserve and zoning models while others, quite simply, do not.

For example, the provinces of Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan, home to 99% of Canada's Class I farmland, are without centralized models of farmland preservation, the results of which have been devastating. Ontario, for instance, with over 56% of the nation's Class I land has lost, in the two decades between 1976 and 1996, over 150,000 acres or 18% of the province's Class I land to urban encroachment and non-agricultural interests. In the absence of protective policies even those provinces with a relatively scarce amount of dependable farmland continue to report losses. Nova Scotia, for example, between 1921 and 2006, has seen over 80% of its working farmland used for purposes other than agriculture.

Sadly enough, even the provinces with established farmland preservation policies are not without reproach. BC's Agricultural Land Reserve and Quebec's Act to preserve agricultural land, both benchmark planning policies designed to protect the provinces' small amount of prime farmland from encroaching development, have seen a slow erosion of their original principles. Since its inception, BC's reserve, encompassing only 5% of the province's land, has seen a net loss of over 35,000 hectares, 72% of that in the more fertile, valuable lands of the south. Quebec, too, where only 2% of the province's land can be cultivated, is considering removing over 514 hectares of valuable farmland around the Montreal area to make room for a highway.

In the absence of binding legislation to protect Canadian agricultural land, many concerned farmers and citizens are taking the responsibility of farmland preservation upon themselves. Some individuals are using covenants and agricultural easements to prohibit future development and division of their land. Others are donating part or their entire agricultural land base to trusts. The Ontario Farmland Trust, BC's The Land Conservancy and Saskatchewan's Genesis Land Conservancy are some examples of organizations that are not only conserving farmland but are ensuring that that the land is farmed in a sustainable or, in the case of Genesis, in an organic manner. Unfortunately, implementing these measures can be time consuming and cumbersome. It also

puts the onus on individual farmers and non-governmental organizations, rather than the governments themselves, to preserve the fertility and biodiversity of Canada's agricultural landscape.

Canada's farmland is a finite resource. Once removed it cannot be recovered. Yet urban encroachment and development, poor farming practices and, loosely structured land use planning policies continue to erode the small amount of viable agricultural land available to Canadians. Ultimately, Canadians are losing the ability to feed themselves. Our federal government can justifiably be called upon to initiate legislation that will preserve farmland, indefinitely, for the good of present and future generations of Canadians. This is, indeed, a matter of national security.

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