

Measuring Farmland Loss in Ontario 2000 to 2021

Official Plan Amendments, 2000–2021

Draft: October 10, 2026

24,505

hectares to development

3,171

hectares to rural

4,369

hectares under special policy

Project led by Primary Investigator Dr. Sara Epp

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Purpose and how to read the report

This report continues the southern Ontario farmland conversion study developed by Wayne Caldwell and colleagues. Led by Dr. Sara Epp, the project tracks changes to the official planning designation of prime agricultural land through Official Plan Amendments (OPAs).

How to Read the Numbers

The headline total of 32,044.89 hectares adds together the three study categories. Seven OPAs include land in more than one category, so this total should not be read as an exact count of separate parcels. It also does not mean that every hectare has already been built on. Land redesignated for development is the clearest measure of formal farmland loss. Rural redesignations and special policies weaken or change agricultural protection, even when farming continues for a time.

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Executive Summary

What the Study Found

The data presented in this report is from OPAs from 2000 to 2021 that redesignated prime agricultural land to a non-farm land use. There were 676 individual OPA records that were labelled as either a development, rural or site specific/special policy. There were seven files that included hectares in more than one of these categories. Together, these files record 32,044.89 hectares of prime agricultural land redesignated between 2000 and 2021.

Table 1: Redesignation type by area, entries and share

Redesignation Type	Area (ha)	Entries	Share
Prime agriculture to development	24,505.06	285	76.5%
Prime agriculture to rural	3,171.09	51	9.9%
Site-specific or special policy	4,368.74	347	13.6%
Gross recorded area	32,044.89	683	100.0%

- Development-related change accounts for more than three-quarters of the total recorded area. Much of this total comes from a small number of large amendments involving urban boundaries or updates needed to bring municipal plans into line with provincial policy.
- Site-specific changes are the most common. The study found 347 site-specific entries compared with 285 development entries, but the typical site-specific entry affected only 2.20 hectares. This shows a pattern of many small amendments rather than a few large changes.
- Rural conversion is the smallest category and is highly concentrated. York Region alone accounts for 1,755.48 hectares, including a single 1,696.42-hectare record in 2006.
- The Greater Golden Horseshoe and Central Ontario group accounts for 26,249.23 hectares, or 81.9% of the total recorded area. Southwestern Ontario accounts for 4,463.89 hectares and Southeastern Ontario for 1,331.77 hectares.
- The 2018–2021 extension contributes 2,596.12 hectares: 1,997.08 to development, 134.85 to rural and 464.18 under special policy. The extension contains 73 special-policy entries, demonstrating continuing incremental change even when aggregate hectares are lower.

What the Results Mean for Policy and Monitoring

The Method Measures Decisions, not Bulldozers

1. An OPA establishes or alters planning permission.

Construction may occur years later, may occur only on part of the affected land, or may not occur. Conversely, farmland can leave production without any OPA. The report is therefore a measure of formal planning exposure and change, complementary to land-cover mapping and the Census of Agriculture. It provides an important leading indicator of farmland loss, development trends and growth pressures.

2. The distribution is highly concentrated

York, Peel and Halton Regions together account for 45.1% of the total recorded area and about half of all development-related conversion. Three amendments alone—Halton OPA 38, Peel OPA 15 and Durham OPA 128—account for 6,694 hectares. Province-wide totals therefore need to be read alongside the results for individual municipalities and amendments.

3. Small amendments are cumulatively important

Special-policy amendments are the most numerous and usually affect the smallest areas. Although these permissions may add little to the provincial hectare total, they divide farmland, introduce uses that may conflict with farming and influence later decisions. The number and location of these changes therefore matter as much as their combined area.

4. Provincial reforms change what must be monitored

The 2018–2021 portion of the series sits within the early Ford-government reforms: A Place to Grow, the 2020 Provincial Policy Statement (now the Provincial Planning Statement), new land-needs rules and expanded use of ministerial zoning orders. Since 2022, further changes have removed planning responsibilities from specified upper-tier municipalities, consolidated provincial policy in the 2024 Provincial Planning Statement and created additional pathways for ministerial intervention. An OPA-only protocol can no longer be treated as a complete indicator of formal planning change.

5. Future continuity requires a layered amendment register

Future monitoring should continue to track OPAs, but it should also include Minister's Zoning Orders, provincial changes to official plans, provincial boundary changes and later reversals. A clear reference table is also needed to connect older regional records with newer local municipal records after planning responsibilities move.

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
ERO	Environmental Registry of Ontario
GGH	Greater Golden Horseshoe
MCR	Municipal comprehensive review
OPA	Official Plan Amendment
PPS	Provincial Policy Statement or Provincial Planning Statement, depending on the year

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Introduction

Why Planning-status Data Matters

Prime agricultural land is a finite foundation for food production, farm businesses, rural communities and ecological services. In southern Ontario, this land is also located where urban growth pressure is most persistent. The policy question is therefore not only how much land remains in agricultural production, but when and through which planning decisions governments authorize its conversion or permit new non-agricultural uses.

Caldwell et al. (2022) addressed a longstanding evidence gap by examining municipal Official Plan Amendments (OPAs). The approach recognizes that production statistics, land-cover imagery and parcel assessment data answer different questions. The Census of Agriculture can show changes in land operated by farms, while remote sensing can show physical surface change. Neither necessarily identifies the legal planning decision that enabled a non-agricultural use. OPA records provide that institutional trace and serve as a leading indicator of land use changes.

This report continues that line of inquiry through 2021. It does not reproduce every conclusion of the earlier publication. Instead, it applies the same conceptual categories to the final 2026 dataset, recalculates all results from individual OPA rows and separates the original 2000–2017 period from the four-year extension. It also assesses whether the method remains adequate after major provincial reforms initiated since the Ford government took office in 2018.

Research Questions

1. How much prime agricultural land was recorded in OPAs as converted to development, converted to rural or retained under a site-specific or special policy between 2000 and 2021?
2. How do area, frequency and median amendment size differ among the three categories?
3. Where are the recorded changes concentrated geographically and temporally?
4. What does the 2018–2021 extension add to the baseline?
5. How have provincial planning reforms since 2018 changed the completeness, location and interpretation of the records required by this methodology?

Objectives and scope

Objectives

- Keep the results comparable with the earlier study and clearly document how the final dataset was reviewed and verified
- Describe three pathways through which the planning status of prime agricultural land changes, without collapsing them into a single planning measure.
- Report both the area affected and the number of amendments so that large boundary expansions and small site-specific changes are both visible.
- Identify policy reforms that create new records outside municipal OPA systems or redistribute those records among municipal tiers.
- Provide a practical protocol for extending the series beyond 2021 under the current governance structure.

Geographic Scope

The source dataset contains 34 jurisdiction worksheets spanning the Greater Golden Horseshoe and Central Ontario, Southwestern Ontario and Southeastern Ontario. The set is broad but is not synonymous with all Ontario municipalities. Results describe the jurisdictions represented in the dataset and should not be extrapolated to northern Ontario or to omitted southern jurisdictions without additional collection.

How the Results are Measured

Table 2: What was included and excluded

Included	Excluded
Prime agriculture redesignated to development	Prime agricultural land gained
Prime agriculture redesignated to rural	Prime agriculture converted to mineral aggregate extraction
Prime agriculture retained with site-specific or special policy	LEAR studies
Individual OPA rows adopted or finalized from 2000–2021	Secondary agricultural amendments

Comparison Periods

The report distinguishes 2000–2017, corresponding to the period studied in Caldwell et al. (2022), from 2018–2021, the continuation period contained in the final dataset. This split is analytically useful but not a controlled before-and-after evaluation: the two windows have unequal duration, and the later period overlaps major policy transitions and pandemic-era changes in government operations. In some cases, additional files from the initial 2000–2017

period were identified, as well, the City of London was officially added, after being omitted in the earlier iteration.

Ontario Agricultural Planning Context

Ontario's land-use planning system is hierarchical. The Planning Act authorizes municipal official plans and amendments, while provincial policy statements and provincial plans establish interests and rules with which municipal decisions must be consistent or conform. Before the recent restructuring, upper-tier counties and regions commonly provided a regional official plan, growth allocation, agricultural system mapping and approval framework within which lower-tier municipalities planned.

Prime Agricultural Land

The Canada Land Inventory and municipal agricultural designations were used to identify prime agricultural areas, generally associated with Class 1, 2 and 3 soils and specialty crop areas. The unit being tracked is not soil quality alone. It is land identified as prime agricultural within the applicable planning framework and then affected by a formal amendment.

The Pre-2018 Policy Architecture

- The Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) provided province-wide direction to protect prime agricultural areas for long-term agricultural use and prescribed tests for non-agricultural uses and settlement expansion.
- The Greenbelt Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Niagara Escarpment Plan added geographically specific constraints within Central Ontario.
- The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe coordinated population and employment forecasts, intensification, settlement boundaries and municipal comprehensive reviews.
- Upper-tier official plans translated provincial direction into regional structure, agricultural systems and growth allocations, while lower-tier plans supplied more detailed designations and policies.
- The Ontario Municipal Board, later the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal and Ontario Land Tribunal, generated decisions that often clarified the final disposition of contested amendments.

This system made regional OPA records a practical starting point for research. One regional plan could capture changes affecting several local municipalities, while related files often brought together staff reports, maps, provincial approvals and appeal records. Collecting the information still required substantial work, but the path from decision to supporting evidence was relatively clear.

The Research Method

The earlier iterations of this work (Caldwell et al., 2022; Epp and Caldwell, 2018) tracked OPAs across southern Ontario from 2000–2017. The research treated OPAs as a systematic record of planning decisions that may convert prime agricultural land or authorize additional uses. It combined municipal official-plan records with mapping and supporting documents rather than relying on a single database.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

1. Identify municipalities containing prime agricultural areas using provincial agricultural mapping, Canada Land Inventory information and municipal official-plan schedules.
2. Obtain upper-tier or single-tier OPA lists and identify amendments affecting agricultural designations or policies. In some instances, lower-tier amendments were necessary based on planning structure/authority.
3. Review the amendment, staff report, application, council record, approval instrument and appeal decision as available.
4. Record the application and final dates, purpose, former and new designation, special-policy effect, hectares, location and appeal history.
5. Classify the amendment as development conversion, rural conversion or an agricultural designation retained with a site-specific policy permitting an additional non-agricultural use.
6. Aggregate by municipality, region, year and category while preserving the amendment-level record for verification.

Why the Categories Matter

Table 3: Measures used to interpret the results

Category	Planning meaning	Typical scale
Development	Land leaves the prime agricultural designation for urban, settlement, residential, employment, commercial or related development	Often large but highly variable
Rural	Land moves from prime agricultural to a less restrictive rural designation, agriculture is often still permitted but may not be the only use	Infrequent; occasionally very large
Special policy	Agricultural designation remains, but a site-specific policy permits an additional use or exception	Frequent and generally small

The categories separate broad changes in land designation from smaller, case-by-case exceptions. This distinction matters. A one-hectare special policy and a large urban-boundary amendment are both OPAs, but they affect farming and future land-use decisions in very different ways.

How the 2000–2021 Update was Completed

The continuation preserves the original study's conceptual unit, categories and reliance on OPA evidence. It extends the end date through 2021 and consolidates the completed records into one database. The analysis in this report was rebuilt due to errors, omissions and inconsistency in the earlier datasets.

Continuity Retained

- Planning decisions are the primary object of measurement.
- Prime agricultural land is identified through the planning designation and supporting agricultural mapping.
- The three outcome categories remain development, rural and site-specific or special policy.
- The final adoption or approval year is used for temporal aggregation.
- Municipal documents and appeal records remain the preferred verification chain.

Analytical Refinements

- Every recorded value is recalculated from the individual OPA row.
- A record containing values in more than one category remains one OPA record but contributes one entry to each populated category.
- Development, rural and special-policy results are reported separately before any combined total is presented.

Resulting Analytic File

Table 4: Data highlights and key numbers

Measure	Count
County/region worksheets represented	34
Individual OPA records that redesignated prime agricultural land	676
Number of entries across all three designations	683
Records populated in more than one included category	7
Years covered	22

Provincial Overview

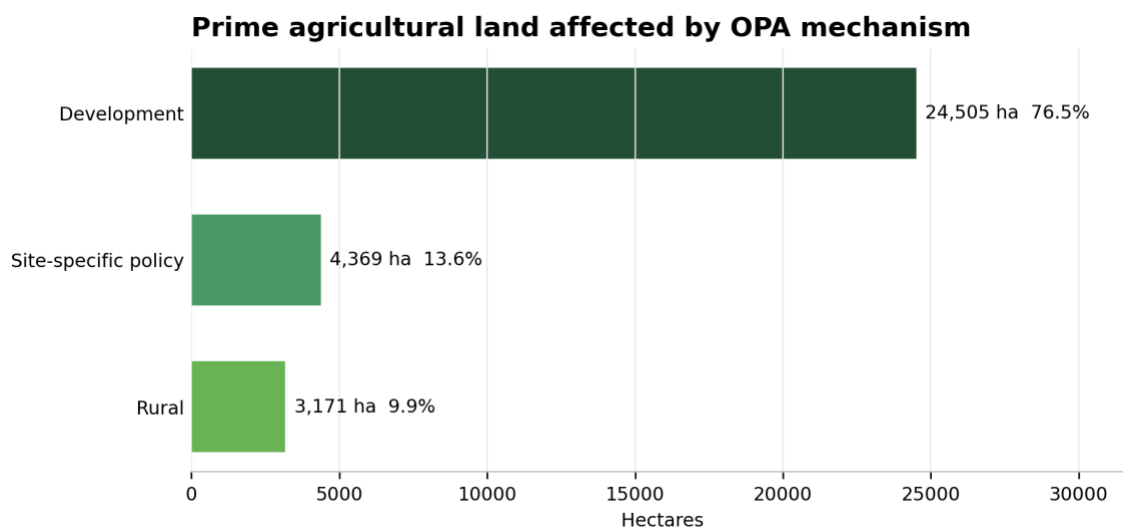


Figure 1: Gross recorded area by OPA designation category

The development conversion accounts for 24,505.06 hectares, or 76.5% of total recorded area. Site-specific or special-policy change accounts for 4,368.74 hectares, and rural conversion for 3,171.09 hectares. The dominance of development by area is clear, but it does not mean that development is the most frequent planning redevelopment.

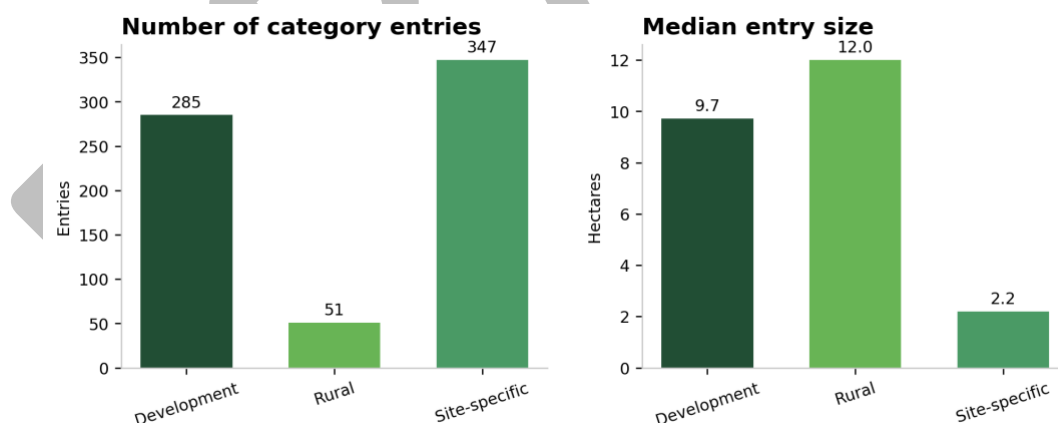


Figure 2: Entry frequency and median entry

The pattern changes when amendments are counted rather than measured by area. Special-policy redesignations are most common at 347, followed by development at 285 and rural at 51. The typical redesignation size is 2.20 hectares for special policy, 9.71 hectares for development and 12.00 hectares for rural conversion. A few large development amendments raise the average well above the typical value.

Prime Agriculture Converted to Development

The dataset includes 24,505.06 hectares in the development field across 285 entries. This is the most direct measure in the dataset of prime agricultural land removed from an agricultural designation for urban, settlement, residential, employment, commercial or related development purposes.

Concentration

Table 5: Leading jurisdictions - development conversion

Jurisdiction	Development (ha)	Share of category
York	5,233.47	21.4%
Peel	4,323.44	17.6%
Halton	2,731.00	11.1%
Simcoe	2,059.98	8.4%
Durham	1,667.00	6.8%
Waterloo	1,378.96	5.6%
Niagara	1,090.44	4.4%
Oxford	907.18	3.7%
Hamilton	900.83	3.7%
Wellington	853.71	3.5%

York, Peel and Halton account for 50.1% of all development hectares. Adding Simcoe and Durham raises the share to 65.4%. This concentration reflects the influence of growth-management and urban-boundary expansions in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Large Amendments

The largest individual development entries include Halton OPA 38 at 2,656 hectares, Peel OPA 15 at 2,428 hectares and Durham OPA 128 at 1,610 development hectares. Durham OPA 128 also contains 26 hectares in the rural field. These three amendments demonstrate why the mean OPA size is not representative of a typical development approval.

Interpretation

Large development amendments often implement coordinated growth allocation, settlement expansion or conformity decisions. They matter because a single decision can change the long-term planning status of a landscape-scale area. Smaller development amendments remain important, particularly where they fragment continuous agricultural systems or accumulate near settlement edges.

Prime Agriculture Converted to Rural

The dataset records 3,171.09 hectares converted from prime agriculture to rural designation across 51 entries. Rural conversion accounts for 9.9% of total recorded area and has a median entry of 12.00 hectares.

Table 6: Leading jurisdictions - rural conversion

Jurisdiction	Rural (ha)	Share of category
York	1,755.48	55.4%
Niagara	240.00	7.6%
Simcoe	185.66	5.9%
Hastings	178.60	5.6%
Prescott and Russell	136.82	4.3%
Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry	120.00	3.8%
Prince Edward County	109.63	3.5%
Grey	106.70	3.4%
Ottawa	70.20	2.2%
Northumberland	59.40	1.9%

The York Effect

More than half of all rural-conversion hectares occur in York Region. A single 2006 record contributes 1,696.42 hectares and explains most of the category's provincial spike in 2006–2010. Without that OPA, the category would be much smaller and more dispersed.

What Rural Redesignation Signifies

A rural designation is not identical to an urban or development designation. Farming may continue, and the land may remain open. The planning change nevertheless matters because rural policies often permit a wider range of non-farm uses or lot patterns than prime-agricultural policies. It can therefore reduce the durability of long-term agricultural protection and create a different platform for future applications.

Site-specific and Special Policy Change

The use of OPAs with site-specific or special policies contributed to the redesignation of 4,368.74 hectares across 347 entries. In this category, the underlying amendments generally retain the agricultural designation while permitting an additional use or policy exception.

Table 7: Leading jurisdictions - site-specific and special policy conversion

Jurisdiction	Special policy (ha)	Share of category
Niagara	846.34	19.4%
Perth	564.83	12.9%
Norfolk	517.00	11.8%
Simcoe	488.83	11.2%
Halton	281.95	6.5%
Lambton	254.75	5.8%
Haldimand	246.22	5.6%
Dufferin	189.69	4.3%
Prince Edward County	137.02	3.1%
Peel	126.70	2.9%

Frequency, Scale and Cumulative Effect

The category has 62 more entries than development, but less than one-fifth of the area. The 2.20-hectare median shows that a typical OPA is small. Keyword screening of the dataset narrative flags 107 special-policy records, representing 332.74 hectares, as potentially related to severance, surplus farm dwellings or lot creation.

Why Small Permissions Matter

A small amendment can still introduce a residence, commercial activity, institutional use or other non-agricultural use into a farming area. Repeated OPAs can impact land values, generate compatibility complaints, complicate farm expansion and weaken the expectation that the area will remain primarily agricultural. The long-run effect depends on location and clustering and should be monitored to fully understand the impacts of these amendments on active agricultural land.

Where Farmland Conversion is Concentrated

Where the Total Recorded Area is Largest

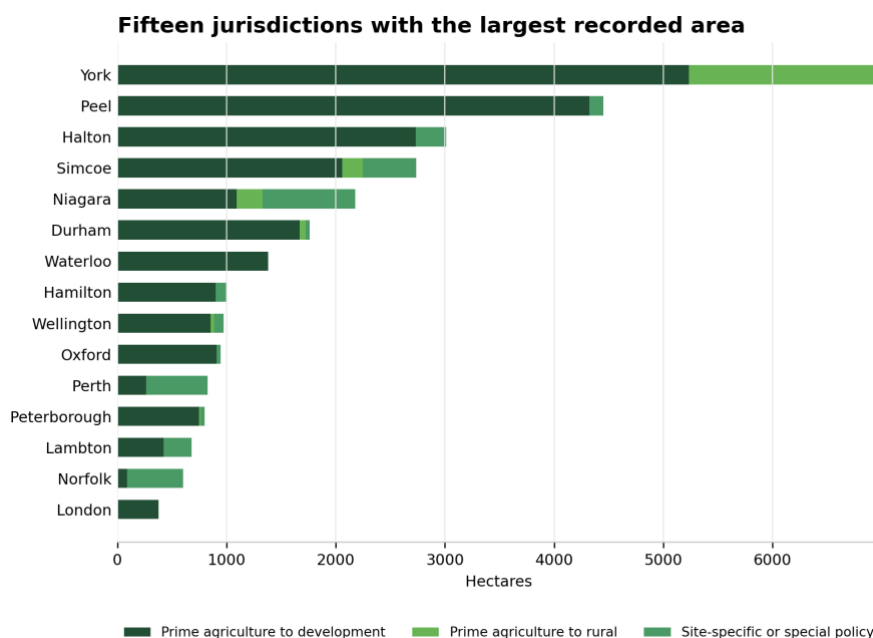


Figure 3: Fifteen jurisdictions with the largest total recorded area

York records 6,988.95 hectares, followed by Peel, Halton, Simcoe and Niagara. The mix differs sharply: York combines large development and rural values; Peel and Halton are dominated by development; Niagara and Simcoe have substantial values in all three categories.

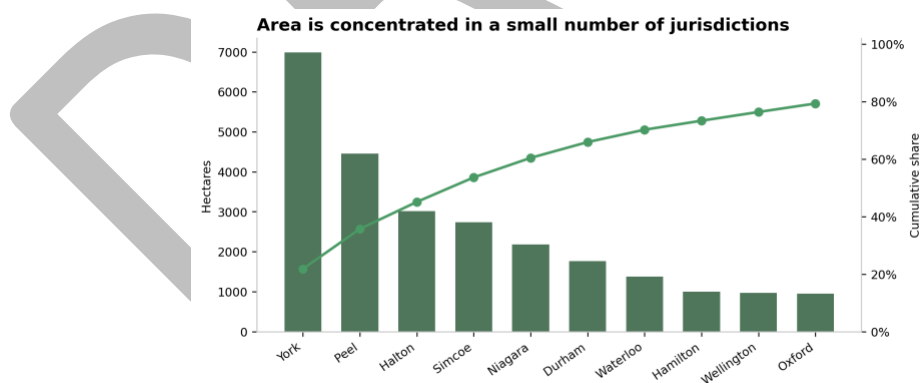


Figure 4: Jurisdiction totals and cumulative share of the combined total

The five leading jurisdictions account for about 60.4% of the total recorded area. Because a few very large amendments shape the results, changing the interpretation of one of them could noticeably change the provincial total.

Golden Horseshoe

The six-jurisdiction Golden Horseshoe grouping records 19,390.94 hectares, or 60.5% of the provincial study total. It includes 15,946.18 hectares converted to development, 2,051.48 hectares converted to rural designations and 1,393.29 hectares affected by site-specific or special policies. The dataset contains 50 development OPAs, 9 rural OPAs and 79 special-policy OPAs for these jurisdictions. These represent 135 unique OPAs and 138 category entries.

Table 8: Conversion by region in the Golden Horseshoe

Jurisdiction	Development	Rural	Special	Total
York	5,233.47	1,755.48	0.00	6,988.95
Peel	4,323.44	0.00	126.70	4,450.14
Halton	2,731.00	0.00	281.95	3,012.95
Niagara	1,090.44	240.00	846.34	2,176.78
Durham	1,667.00	56.00	35.77	1,758.77
Hamilton	900.83	0.00	102.53	1,003.36
Total	15,946.18	2,051.48	1,393.29	19,390.94

Regional Reading

York, Peel and Halton account for 14,452.04 hectares, or 74.5% of the Golden Horseshoe total. Their results are strongly shaped by major growth-planning and urban-boundary amendments. Niagara has a more balanced mix of development, rural and special-policy change, while Durham and Hamilton record smaller totals.

Central Ontario

The broader 15-jurisdiction Central Ontario grouping includes all six Golden Horseshoe jurisdictions plus Simcoe, Waterloo, Wellington, Peterborough, Haldimand, Dufferin, Kawartha Lakes, Northumberland and Brant. Together, they record 26,249.24 hectares, or 81.9% of the provincial study total: 21,349.07 hectares to development, 2,395.03 hectares to rural designations and 2,505.14 hectares under special policy. There are 149 development entries, 27 rural entries and 142 special-policy entries. Because this grouping includes the Golden Horseshoe, the two regional totals should not be added together.

Regional Reading

The nine Central Ontario jurisdictions outside the Golden Horseshoe account for a further 6,858.3 hectares: 5,402.89 hectares to development, 343.55 hectares to rural designations and 1,111.85 hectares under special policy. Simcoe has the largest total in this part of the region, followed by Waterloo and Wellington. Simcoe combines large-area redesignations with many smaller amendments, while several other jurisdictions show a greater role for site-specific changes.

The Central group also contains the jurisdictions most affected by the removal of upper-tier planning responsibilities. Historical regional OPA data included in this study was beneficial, but future amendments increasingly need to be collected through lower-tier municipalities and other provincial policies or processes.

Table 9: Conversion by region in Central Ontario

Jurisdiction	Development	Rural	Special	Gross total
York	5,233.47	1,755.48	0.00	6,988.95
Peel	4,323.44	0.00	126.70	4,450.14
Halton	2,731.00	0.00	281.95	3,012.95
Simcoe	2,059.98	185.66	488.83	2,734.47
Niagara	1,090.44	240.00	846.34	2,176.78
Durham	1,667.00	56.00	35.77	1,758.77
Waterloo	1,378.96	0.00	0.00	1,378.96
Hamilton	900.83	0.00	102.53	1,003.36
Wellington	853.71	31.75	86.32	971.78
Peterborough	745.94	15.40	36.86	798.20
Haldimand	73.77	0.00	246.22	319.99
Dufferin	59.02	0.00	189.69	248.71
Kawartha Lakes	128.67	50.09	62.45	241.21
Northumberland	38.14	59.40	1.48	99.02
Brant	64.70	1.25	0.00	65.95
Total	21,349.07	2,395.03	2,505.14	26,249.24

Southwestern Ontario

The 11-jurisdiction Southwestern Ontario grouping records 4,463.89 hectares: 2,714.79 to development, 107.30 to rural and 1,641.80 under special policy. The region contributes only 13.9% of total recorded area but contains 194 special-policy entries, more than the Central grouping's 142.

Regional Reading

Perth has 93 OPAs across development and special policy, while Norfolk's 517.00 special-policy hectares dominate its local profile. Oxford is led by development conversion, while Lambton and Haldimand have substantial special policy totals relative to their development values. This supports the previous study's findings that Southwestern Ontario often displays a dispersed, site-specific pattern rather than the landscape-scale boundary expansions seen in the most urbanized Central jurisdictions.

Table 10: Conversion by region in Southwestern Ontario

Jurisdiction	Development	Rural	Special	Gross total
Oxford	907.18	0.00	38.39	945.57
Perth	259.88	0.00	564.83	824.71
Lambton	422.64	0.00	254.75	677.38
Norfolk	86.04	0.00	517.00	603.04
London	375.00	0.00	0.00	375.00
Elgin	243.83	0.00	0.00	243.83
Chatham-Kent	151.50	0.00	57.94	209.44
Middlesex	78.30	0.60	95.48	174.38
Huron	150.08	0.00	0.00	150.08
Grey	0.00	106.70	34.69	141.39
Bruce	40.34	0.00	78.73	119.07

Southeastern Ontario

The eight-jurisdiction Southeastern Ontario grouping records 1,331.77 hectares: 441.21 to development, 668.76 to rural and 221.80 under special policy. Its 51 rural and special-policy entries together outnumber its 12 development entries.

Table 11: Conversion by region in Southeastern Ontario

Jurisdiction	Development	Rural	Special	Gross total
Prince Edward County	0.00	109.63	137.02	246.65
Hastings	40.06	178.60	0.00	218.66
Prescott and Russell	50.59	136.82	29.14	216.55
Ottawa	132.00	70.20	13.03	215.23
Leeds and Grenville	198.00	0.00	7.00	205.00
Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry	1.36	120.00	35.61	156.97
Renfrew	0.00	53.51	0.00	53.51
Lennox and Addington	19.20	0.00	0.00	19.20

Regional reading

Ottawa has the largest gross total in the group, followed by Hastings and Prescott and Russell. Rural conversion plays a greater proportional role here than in Central or Southwestern Ontario. Hastings records 178.60 rural hectares, Prescott and Russell 136.82, Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry 120.00 and Prince Edward County 109.63.

Change Over Time

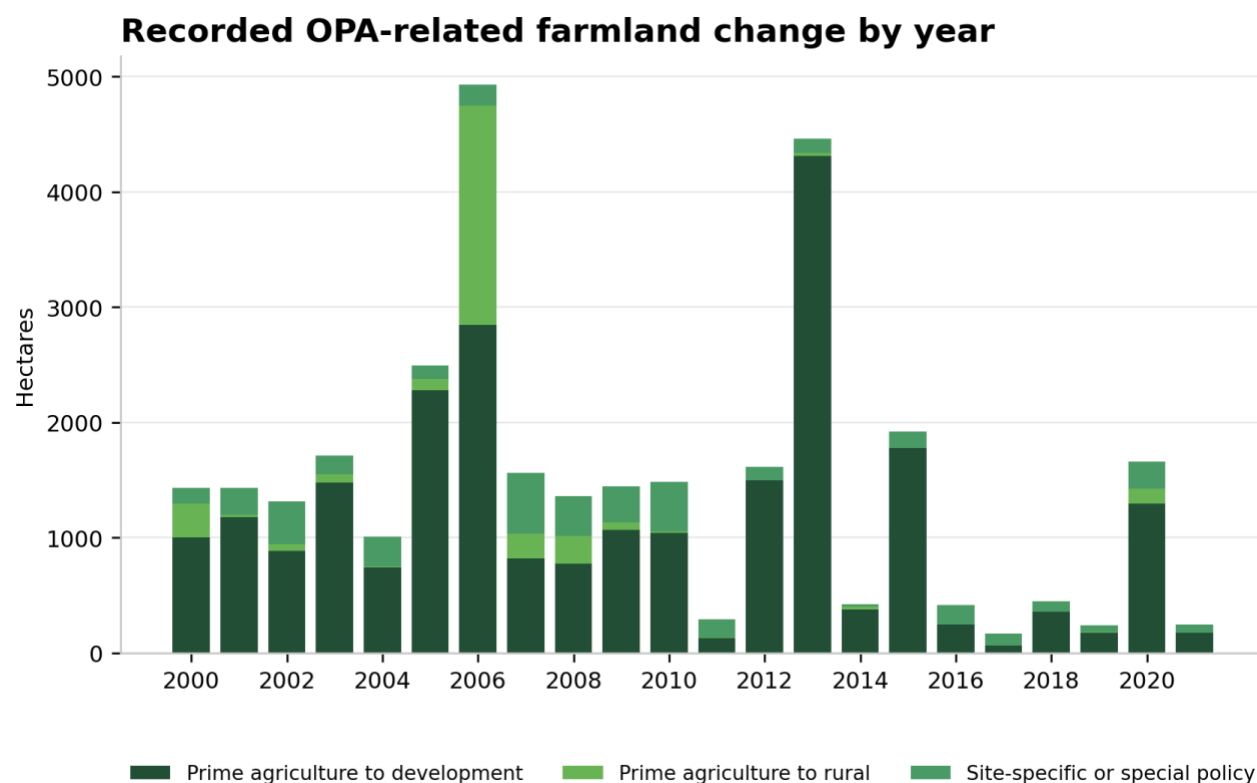


Figure 5: Annual total recorded area by category and final-adoption year, 2000–2021

Table 12: Conversion by five-year time period

Period	Development	Rural	Special	Gross total
2000–2005	7,561.15	539.18	1,278.23	9,378.56
2006–2010	6,545.57	2,438.85	1,793.93	10,778.35
2011–2015	8,093.05	56.61	558.15	8,707.82
2016–2021	2,305.29	136.45	738.43	3,180.17

The annual series is not smooth. The largest gross years are 2006, with 4,930.49 hectares, and 2013, with 4,461.71 hectares. The 2006 peak combines Peel's large development amendment with York's large rural redesignation. The 2013 peak is dominated by Halton OPA 38 and Durham OPA 128.

The 2011–2015 period has the largest development total, while 2006–2010 has the largest rural and special-policy totals. The 2016–2021 period is lower by area but contains 115 special-policy entries, illustrating that frequency can remain high even when large boundary amendments are absent.

The 2018–2021 continuation

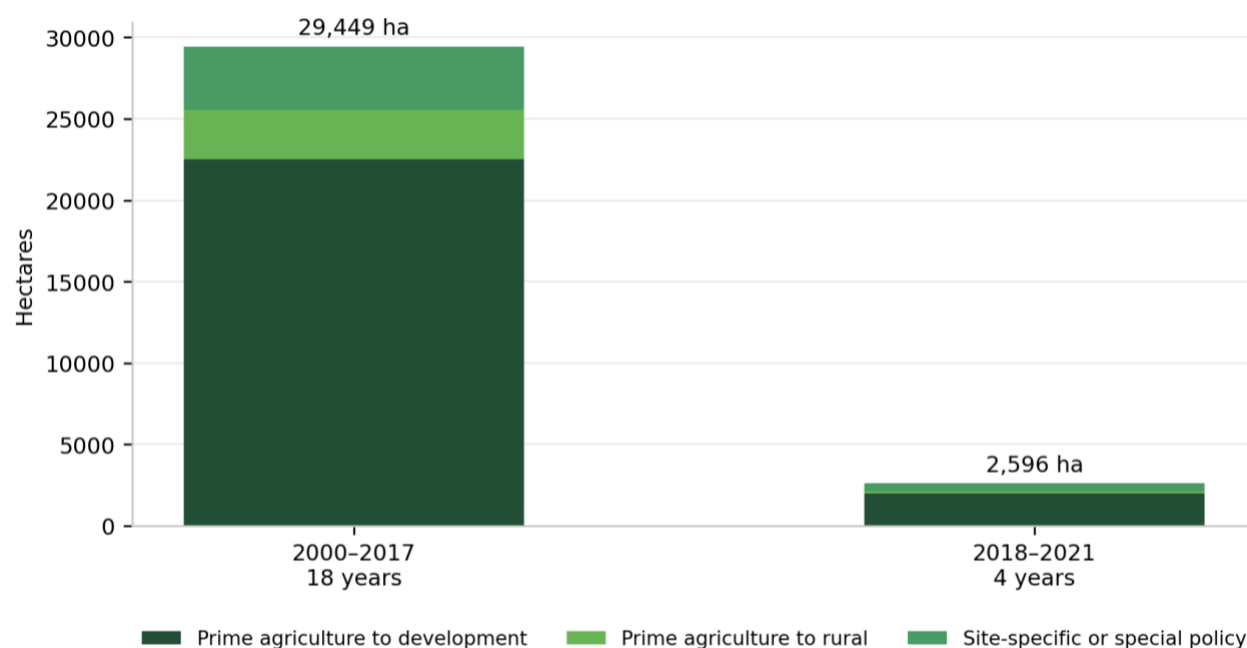


Figure 6: Gross recorded area in the previous study and the four-year extension

Table 13: Original study period and 2018 - 2021 extension

Measure	2000–2017	2018–2021
Development area	22,507.98 ha	1,997.08 ha
Rural area	3,036.24 ha	134.85 ha
Special-policy area	3,904.56 ha	464.18 ha
Gross recorded area	29,448.77 ha	2,596.12 ha
Development entries	253	32
Rural entries	47	4
Special-policy entries	274	73

The four-year extension contributes 8.1% of the 22-year total recorded area but 15.9% of all category entries. Its activity is therefore smaller in area and more intensive in amendment count than a simple comparison of totals suggests. Special-policy entries are particularly prominent: 73 entries in four years, compared with 274 across the preceding 18 years.

The extension should not be interpreted as proof that policy reform caused the observed pattern. The window is short, contains a 2020 development spike of 1,292.68 hectares and overlaps the COVID-19 pandemic. It also precedes the largest post-2021 governance changes discussed below.

Changes to Planning Policy since 2018

Impacts on Data Collection

Table 14: Timeline of planning reforms relevant to farmland monitoring

Year	Change	Why it matters for this study
2019	A Place to Grow replaces the 2017 Growth Plan; More Homes, More Choice changes planning legislation	New growth framework and altered approval environment
2020	PPS 2020 takes effect; Growth Plan Amendment 1 extends horizon to 2051 and updates forecasts and land-needs method	Changes assumptions behind settlement and growth-allocation OPAs
2020–2021	Bills 197 and 257 expand or clarify ministerial zoning-order powers	Formal land-use change can occur outside the municipal OPA stream
2022	Bill 23 creates upper-tier municipalities without planning responsibilities	Future records shift from regional to lower-tier sources
2022–2023	Greenbelt removals are made and then reversed by Bill 136	Provincial plan-boundary changes and reversals require a separate amendment log
2023–2024	Bills 150 and 162 address provincial official-plan modifications	Adoption, modification, reversal and in-force status must be tracked separately
2024	Bill 185 phases removal of planning responsibilities; PPS 2024 replaces PPS 2020 and A Place to Grow	The governance and policy baseline changes materially
2026	Bill 98 enables phased Simcoe responsibility transfers	A county-wide research stream may fragment at different times

Two Different Effects

Some reforms change the rules for approving farmland conversion. Others change which level of government makes the decision and where the record is kept. Both affect the study. New settlement-boundary rules can change when amendments occur, while transfers of upper-tier planning responsibility can create a break in the data even if development pressure has not changed.

Period Alignment

Only the 2019–2021 reforms overlap the quantitative study window. Reforms from 2022 onward are not captured in this study.



Figure 7: Planning-policy timeline. Provincial policy and governance changes affecting interpretation and continuation of the OPA series, 2000–2026.

Early Changes, 2019–2021

A Place to Grow and Growth Plan Amendment 1

A Place to Grow took effect in 2019. Amendment 1, effective August 28, 2020, updated population and employment forecasts, treated the Schedule 3 forecasts as minimums for the conformity round, extended the horizon to 2051 and introduced a new market-based land-needs methodology. These changes influenced the assumptions used in municipal comprehensive reviews and settlement-area planning. For the OPA method, the relevant effect is not an automatic hectare change but a changed policy basis for later boundary and conformity amendments.

Provincial Policy Statement, 2020

The PPS 2020 replaced the 2014 statement on May 1, 2020. It increased the minimum planning horizon and provided more flexibility for locally appropriate residential development on rural lands. The final policy retained prime-agricultural protection but did not include a proposed universal agricultural-impact-assessment requirement for non-agricultural uses and settlement expansion.

Ministerial zoning orders

Bill 197 in 2020 expanded order-making powers outside the Greenbelt, including enhanced powers connected with site-plan control and inclusionary zoning. Bill 257 in 2021 further addressed the relationship between ministerial zoning orders and provincial policy. A ministerial zoning order can enable development without a municipal OPA.

Removal of Upper-tier Planning Responsibilities

Bill 23 created two classes of upper-tier municipalities: those with planning responsibilities and those without. Its transition provisions allow portions of an upper-tier official plan to be treated as lower-tier official plans and transfer pending matters. Bill 185 made Peel, Halton and York upper-tier municipalities without planning responsibilities effective July 1, 2024 and provided for other specified upper tiers to transition on dates set by proclamation.

Direct effects on the methodology

Table 15: Effects of upper-tier planning changes on the research method

Former Regional Advantage	Post-transition Challenge
One regional OPA register	Multiple lower-tier registers with different numbering, portals and archival practices
One regional official-plan schedule	Legacy regional policies may be deemed part of several local plans and amended independently
Regional growth-allocation context	Local amendments can be difficult to interpret without a reconstructed regional picture
Centralized planner contact and supporting files	Institutional memory and files may be distributed or transferred

Former Regional Advantage	Post-transition Challenge
Consistent geography through time	The record source changes at the effective date even when the land does not

Risk of a False Trend Break

If researchers continue to search only the former regional website, post-transition counts will fall even if approvals continue. If they switch to lower-tier registers without linking inherited regional amendments, the same policy may be counted twice. A visible drop or rise after transition could therefore be an artefact of governance, not a change in farmland conversion.

Current Planning Framework, 2024–2026

Provincial Planning Statement, 2024

The Provincial Planning Statement took effect on October 20, 2024, replacing the PPS 2020 and A Place to Grow with one province-wide instrument. The consolidated framework removes the former municipal comprehensive review concept and permits settlement-area boundary changes to be considered outside a periodic MCR, subject to the applicable criteria. Future OPA series may therefore contain more dispersed boundary changes rather than a small number of synchronized conformity exercises.

Provincial Official Plan Interventions

Bill 150 deemed selected 2022 and 2023 ministerial official plan decisions never to have been made. Bill 162 in 2024 reinstated certain municipally requested modifications for a set of official plans. These episodes show why “adopted,” “approved,” “modified,” “in force,” “repealed” and “superseded” cannot be collapsed into one date or status. A temporary modification should not be counted as permanent conversion after it has been reversed, but its existence may still be relevant as an exposure amendment.

Greenbelt Reversal

Bill 136 in 2023 restored lands removed from the Greenbelt in 2022 and restored the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve protections. The change and reversal occurred through provincial legislation and plan boundaries, not necessarily through municipal OPAs.

Simcoe in 2026

Bill 98 provides that the County of Simcoe can become an upper-tier municipality without planning responsibilities for different lower-tier areas at different times, expressly identifying Bradford West Gwillimbury, Innisfil and New Tecumseth in the first statutory category and providing for further prescribed phases. The unit of administrative transition is therefore no longer necessarily the entire county on one date.

Updating the Research Method

Table 16: How to preserve the series after 2021

Risk	Required Protocol
OPA-only undercoverage	Track OPAs, ministerial zoning orders, ministerial official-plan modifications and provincial plan-boundary changes in parallel
Regional responsibility transfer	Maintain a jurisdiction crosswalk and search every successor lower-tier register after the effective date
Duplicate or superseding approvals	Use a stable amendment identifier and relationship fields for amendment, modification, appeal, repeal and replacement
Boundary-change timing	Record application, adoption, approval and in-force dates; choose one declared date for trend analysis
Changing policy tests	Attach PPS and provincial-plan regime codes based on the decision date
Reduced appeal evidence	Strengthen municipal file, registry and provincial-order verification rather than relying on tribunal records
Temporary reversals	Report both exposure history and final in-force status; do not net amendments without an audit trail

Recommended Amendment Model

Future work should replace the single OPA table with linked records that follow each site or policy area over time. One place may be affected by several planning tools, decisions or reversals. Each record should identify who made the decision, the type and number of the file, key dates, mapped boundaries, the land designation before and after, the permitted use, hectares, source documents, verification status and links to earlier decisions.

Limits of the data

What the Data can and cannot Establish

- Coverage is not province wide. The dataset contains 34 jurisdiction sheets, excluding northern Ontario.
- Completeness varies by jurisdiction and year. Municipal websites, numbering systems and archival practices differ; older records may be missing or difficult to verify.
- OPA area is not the same as built footprint. A planning approval can precede development, cover land that remains farmed or never be implemented.
- Area measurement methods may vary among amendment documents, municipal mapping and researcher calculations. Precision shown to two decimals can exceed the accuracy of the source mapping.

- Final-adoption year may not be consistently equivalent to approval or in-force date, particularly for appealed or provincially modified matters.
- An OPA-only dataset misses ministerial zoning orders, provincial plan amendments, some boundary decisions and other instruments outside the municipal amendment process.
- Policy reforms and transfers of planning responsibility change how and where records are created. A change in the data after a transition may therefore reflect the record-keeping system rather than an actual change in land-use pressure.

Recommendations and conclusion

A Durable Monitoring Program for the next Phase

Recommendations

1. Create a clear reference table linking old and new municipal responsibilities for every upper-tier responsibility transfer, beginning with the seven major regional study jurisdictions.
2. Expand collection beyond OPAs to ministerial zoning orders, ministerial official-plan modifications and provincial plan-boundary changes while retaining type of planning tool.
3. Add mapped boundaries or authoritative parcel references so overlapping amendments can be dissolved and cumulative fragmentation can be analyzed.
4. Report area, entry count, median, top amendments and jurisdiction shares together. No single indicator adequately describes the study.
5. Publish data annually so that municipalities can perform accuracy checks and distinguish real trends from legal or administrative breaks.

Conclusion

The final dataset records 24,505.06 hectares of prime agricultural land converted to development, 3,171.09 hectares converted to rural and 4,368.74 hectares affected by site-specific or special policies between 2000 and 2021. Development is dominant by area; special policy is dominant by frequency. The geography is concentrated, the annual series is shaped by a few major amendments and the four-year extension confirms the continuing importance of small, incremental decisions.

The original methodology remains valuable because it captures formal planning decisions that other datasets may miss; however, the planning system has changed. Provincial orders, direct changes to official plans, the 2024 Provincial Planning Statement and the transfer of regional planning responsibilities mean that regional OPA records alone are no longer enough. Future monitoring should keep the original categories while adding other planning tools, tracking reversals and linking decisions to mapped locations.

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