

Ottawa has an obligation to protect the Greenbelt

The federal government needs to protect the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve and include it within Rouge park boundaries, writes David Crombie.

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It's good news that federal Environment and Climate Change Minister Steven Guilbeault has signalled that he may step in to fight for Ontario's Greenbelt.

His statements confirm that the federal government has both a responsibility and an obligation to protect the largest portion of the Greenbelt lands under attack. This is the 4,950-acre Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP), adjacent to the Rouge National Park—Canada's first national urban park and the only one that includes a mandate for regenerative agriculture.

Ottawa needs to engage now, and consider ways to protect the Rouge National Urban Park, by including the DRAP within the park boundaries. It can require an environmental review of any proposed development on the DRAP lands, and refuse to fund related infrastructure projects through federal programs.

DRAP represents nearly 70 per cent of the 7,400 acres the Ford government has stripped from the Greenbelt after repeated promises never to do so.

Public opposition has been wide, deep and constant. It includes the First Nations treaty holders in the area. It includes farmers concerned about the staggering loss of farmland in Ontario — an average of 319 acres per day.

Four federal issues

There is urgency for Ottawa to act. There are four issues of federal interest and jurisdiction to address.

First, the federal government has an obligation to protect the national park. Parks Canada's analysis suggests there is a "probable risk of irreversible harm to wildlife, natural ecosystems and agricultural landscapes within the Rouge National Park" if DRAP is developed as proposed.

The farmland and ecological values of DRAP include abundant Class 1 farmland, lands classified as Natural Heritage that cover more than 41 per cent of the area and additional lands classified for potential ecological restoration and connectivity covering 17 per cent.

The Ford government's planned destruction of DRAP would reduce the viability and functionality of the Rouge Park's ecosystems and farmland. It would threaten the climate resilience of the park as well as regional wildlife and neighbouring communities.

The Greenbelt lands, along with the national park, contribute to the ecological connection between the Oak Ridges Moraine and Lake Ontario — the only intact, contiguous connection between the two in the entire Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Second, Species at Risk introductions in the DRAP by Parks Canada would be compromised, as would the viability of dozens of other Species at Risk.

Third, under the Federal Fisheries Act, the tributaries of Duffins Creek, Petticoat Creek and Rouge River would be impacted by the Ford government's planned development — increasing siltation, pollution loading, impacting water flow volumes and temperature.

Fourth, the Ford government's lack of consultation means it is already violating the Memorandum of Agreement between Ontario and Parks Canada Respecting the Establishment of Rouge National Urban Park, still in force. Under this agreement the province has a duty to consult with Parks Canada on any policy changes that may impact the Park. Removing environmental protections, revoking protective legislation and pulling these lands out of the Greenbelt represent fundamental policy changes.

Correcting Untrue Claims

While the Ford Government claims that the DRAP lands are needed for housing, this is blatantly untrue. There is plenty of land available for development that is already serviced or planned to be serviced. These other lands could be developed for housing much more quickly than the DRAP lands. In fact the Region of Durham has publicly contradicted the Ford government's false claims.

It is in the federal government's jurisdiction to take action. It is in the public interest that it moves quickly: protect the DRAP in perpetuity by making it part of the Rouge National Urban Park, consult with Indigenous communities and include them in the ongoing management of the lands.

David Crombie is former Mayor of Toronto, former Member of Parliament and Federal Cabinet and Chair of Friends of the Golden Horseshoe, a citizens' organization.

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