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Re: Niagara Official Plan – Settlement Area Boundary

The Niagara Federation of Agriculture (NFA) represents over 1,400 farm family members. Niagara offers the most diversified area of food production in all of Canada and agriculture has proven to be the economic mainstay within the Region. Agricultural producers have \$838.1 million in gross farm receipts with an employment impact of 19,892 jobs within the Region. From 2011 to 2016, agricultural gross domestic product increased by 15.5%.” It is in Niagara Region’s best interests to ensure the continued success of the agricultural sector within its’ region to secure these continued significant economic contributions. The Niagara Federation of Agriculture (NFA) is the local extension of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) which represents over 38,000 farm family members across our province.

The directors of the Niagara Federation of Agriculture would like to take this opportunity to thank the Region of Niagara for including the agriculture community in the discussion concerning the new Official Plan. We are aware of the February 7<sup>th</sup> deadline for comments. The Niagara Federation of Agriculture would like to submit a few questions before making our final submission. We all agree that Land use planning is a delicate balancing act, considering our needs to address protecting the environment, farmland and public health and safety as well as addressing future growth in housing and job creation, and streamlining of development approvals. Land use planning policies must emphasize the need to maintain this balance. Over the past two years we all have come to realize the importance of securing a safe, sufficient food supply. It is only by protecting our prime agriculture lands that this can be obtained. Please review the following comments and questions below.

1. The draft settlement boundary expansions will result in the loss of 1771 hectares (approximately 4376.24 acres) worth of Prime Agricultural Area. It is posed that 1145 hectares of this will be lost to ‘suitable development.’ The remaining will be re-designated as Natural Environment System features (which do not intend to limit the ability of agricultural uses to continue). A few comments in this regard:
  - a. The NFA feels that this is a large, cumulative amount of farmland loss that will occur within a single policy decision, contrary to several provincial policies focused on protecting prime agricultural areas. Other alternatives for development should be considered in alignment with applicable provincial policies.
  - b. It is important to consider the impacts encroaching development in the countryside and natural heritage designations (in accordance with provincial Natural Heritage policies) have on the ability for farm operations to continue or expand their operations.
2. *Memorandum CWCD 2022-27* specifies that “the draft Official Plan will result in a net gain of over 1500 hectares of Prime Agricultural Area despite the consumption of land for growth.”

- a. Number 1 states a loss of 1771 hectares of Prime Agricultural Area yet number 2 suggests a net gain of over 1500 hectares of Prime Agricultural Area. Could you please clarify the conflicting statements?
- b. The NFA would like a break down of where the net gain of 1500 hectares of Prime Agricultural Land is located. Is this a result of redesignating rural land to prime agricultural land? What lands have been redesignated from rural lands to prime agricultural land? The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs have developed the following definition of Prime Agricultural Lands:

*Ontario's **prime agricultural areas** are the province's most fertile areas where most of our crops are produced. Prime agricultural areas are the foundation of local food production, agri-food exports and the growing bio economy, and make a significant contribution to Ontario's jobs and economic prosperity. This land is finite and non-renewable – great care must be taken to make sure we have this resource for generations of farmers to come.*

*The **Provincial Policy Statement, 2020 (PPS)** protects prime agricultural areas for long-term agricultural use and supports a thriving agricultural industry and rural economy by permitting a range of different uses on agricultural land. Prime agricultural areas are areas where prime agricultural lands predominate. Specialty crop areas shall be given the highest priority for protection, followed by Canada Land Inventory Class 1, 2, and 3 lands, and any associated Class 4 through 7 lands within the prime agricultural area, in this order of priority. 2.3.2 Planning authorities shall designate prime agricultural areas and specialty crop areas in accordance with guidelines developed by the Province, as amended from time to time. Planning authorities are encouraged to use an agricultural system approach to maintain and enhance the geographic continuity of the agricultural land base and the functional and economic connections to the agri-food network.*

According to the Canada Land Inventory, the definition of Class 1, 2 and 3 is as follows:

**Class 1**

*Soils in this class have no significant limitations in use for crops. The soils are deep, are well to imperfectly drained, hold moisture well, and in the original state were well supplied with plant nutrients. They can be managed and cropped without difficulty. Under good management they are moderately high to high in productivity for a wide range of field crops.*

**Class 2**

*Soils in this class have moderate limitations that restrict the range of crops or require moderate conservation practices. The soils are deep and hold moisture well. The limitations are moderate, and the soils can be managed and cropped with little difficulty. Under good management they are moderately high to high in productivity for a fairly wide range of crops.*

**Class 3**

*Soils in this class have moderately severe limitations that restrict the range of crops or require special conservation practices. The limitations are more severe than for class 2 soils. They affect one or more of the following practices: timing and ease of tillage,*

*planting and harvesting, choice of crops, and methods of conservation. Under good management they are fair to moderately high in productivity for a fair range of crops.*

Rural Lands cannot be designated as Prime Agricultural Lands unless they fall under Class 1, 2, or 3 as described above.

According to the Farming and Food Production Protection Act:

*"It is desirable to conserve, protect and encourage the development and improvement of agricultural lands for the production of food, fibre and other agricultural or horticultural products. Agricultural activities may include intensive operations that may cause discomfort and inconveniences to those on adjacent lands. Because of the pressures exerted on the agricultural community, it is increasingly difficult for agricultural owners and operators to effectively produce food, fibre and other agricultural or horticultural products. It is in the Provincial interest that in agricultural areas, agricultural uses and normal farm practices be promoted and protected in a way that balances the needs of the agricultural community with provincial health, safety and environmental concerns."*

*The Act defines a normal farm practice as one which:*

- a. *"is conducted in a manner consistent with proper and acceptable customs and standards, as established and followed by similar agricultural operations under similar circumstances, or*
  - b. *makes use of innovative technology in a manner consistent with proper advanced farm management practices".*
- c. How have the municipalities accounted for the impact of encroaching urban boundaries introducing non-compatible development in the countryside, introducing several potential issues including the hindered ability of *normal farm practices* to continue? What is the impact of this on the agricultural system and agri-food network?
3. Niagara Region has taken an ambitious approach to exceed the minimum intensification rate (i.e., 60% instead of 50%) for future household growth in *delineated built-up areas* as mandated by *The Growth Plan* (see *Niagara Official Plan Appendix 3 – PDS 41-2021 – 2051 Land Needs Assessment*).
- a. NFA supports fixed settlement area boundaries and supports this ambitious approach to intensification. It is unclear, however, why, or how similar ambitious targets could not be directed to slow or stop the absolute loss of farmland, or how the loss of farmland could not be further prevented with these ambitious intensification targets. The NFA would like clarification from the Region. Urban intensification and farmland protection are ‘two sides of the same coin’ – ambitious targets to intensify should translate to ambitious protection of farmland.
4. The Provincial Policy Statement (2020) Policy (PPS) 1.1.3.8 states that the expansion of *settlement area* boundaries can only occur at the time of a *comprehensive review* and only where it has been demonstrated that in *prime agricultural areas*: 1) the lands do not compromise *specialty crop* areas; 2) alternative locations have been evaluated, and i) there are no reasonable alternatives which avoid *prime agricultural areas*; and ii) there are no reasonable alternatives on lower priority agricultural lands in *prime agricultural areas*. Also, PPS (2020) Policy 1.1.3.8 e) states that impacts from new or expanding *settlement*

*areas* on agricultural operations which are adjacent or close to the settlement area are to be mitigated to the extent feasible.

- a. The NFA requests more details as to how the proposed boundary expansion in prime agricultural areas is fulfilling these criteria. In the documents provided for comment none of the above criteria appear to be satisfied or explained
5. Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2020) Policy 2.2.8.3 (f) states that where there is a need for a *settlement area* boundary expansion, *prime agricultural areas* should be avoided where possible. Alternative locations across the Region should be evaluated, prioritized, and determined based on avoiding, minimizing, and mitigating the impact on the *Agricultural System* by evaluating reasonable alternatives to avoid *prime agricultural areas* and, where *prime agricultural areas* cannot be avoided, using lower priority agricultural lands.
- a. What alternatives to the identified/recommended lands for boundary expansion were evaluated and based on which criteria? How was a consensus achieved?
6. Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2020) Policy 2.2.8.3 (h) also notes that any adverse impacts from expanding *settlement areas* should be avoided on the *agri-food network*, including agricultural operations. If avoidance is not possible, these impacts should be minimized and mitigated as determined through an *agricultural impact assessment* (AIA).
- a. Has an Agricultural Impact Assessment been conducted and under which technical guidance/criteria? What were the results (i.e., how will impacts be minimized and mitigated)? If not, at what point in the process will this be conducted?

Thank you once again for this opportunity to work with the Region of Niagara in the development of their Official Plan. The Niagara Federation of Agriculture has some concerns about the Settlement Boundary Areas of the proposed Official Plan and look forward to the Region addressing our concerns. . The struggles of COVID-19 over the past two years highlights the importance and the need for a supply of safe, healthy and locally sourced food. Niagara can fill this need if given the right tools to work with. Please contact me at 289-990-3964 if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,



Chris Mullet Koop  
President  
Niagara Federation of Agriculture