

Going, Going... Gone

Author : Kara Tersen

Going, Going... Gone

Moving from Conversion to Conservation: Stopping the Loss of Agricultural Lands in Alberta

In late 2017, the Alberta Land Institute issued its [*Economic Evaluation of Farmland Conversion and Fragmentation in Alberta, Summary of Findings*](#) (the “ALI Report”). The ALI Report found that there has been significant conversion of prime agricultural land into developed uses (residential and industrial). As outlined in the ALI Report, it was found that (among other things):

- Both farmland and natural areas in the Edmonton-Calgary Corridor have become significantly more fragmented between 1984 and 2013.
- While there was a small reduction in farmland fragmentation between 2000 and 2012 in the Edmonton-Calgary Corridor, there was increased fragmentation around Edmonton, Calgary and Red Deer in that same time period.
- Most of the land converted into developed uses between 2000 and 2012 was of the highest levels of land suitability for agricultural purposes, with 35% of the highest suitability and 34% of the second highest suitability found in Alberta (finding #6).

As part of the research done by the Alberta Land Institute, there was a survey of rural and urban Albertans. The survey revealed that there was “considerable concern about the rapid expansion of the urban areas and the consequence loss of natural and agricultural land in the area”.

Respondents to the survey also indicated that it was “most important to maintain agricultural land for production of food for the local market, followed by air quality, water purification, scenic beauty, and production of food for the global market”.

It would appear that despite recognition of the social, economic and environmental importance of agricultural lands, we still make societal decisions that lead to conversion of agricultural lands to other uses. How do we move from conversion to conservation and stop the loss of Alberta’s agricultural lands?

A report prepared by the Ag Summit and Agrivantage Strategic Initiatives Committee in 2005 ([*Land-Use Policy and the Agri-food Industry in Alberta*](#)) made several recommendations in this regard:

- develop shared vision and goals;
- set new strategic policy priorities;
- develop and implement a data measurement and monitoring system;
- increase communication and collaboration among stakeholders;
- mandate coordinated and integrated planning;
- review provincial policies;
- increase capacity of municipalities to plan and manage within the provincial policy framework; and
- support the preservation of agricultural land.

The Committee noted that conservation of agricultural lands could be supported with regulatory or voluntary tools. For example, B.C. and Ontario have legislation that designates land as agricultural and protects it from development. The committee recommended that Alberta adopt a voluntary approach complemented with legislative and regulatory frameworks. This approach could include the use purchase of development rights (easements) and transfer of development rights.

Some of the legislative framework is already in place. For example, under the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act*, there is provision for conservation easements and tradeable development credits (see our collaborative work with the Miistakis Institute on [Conservation Easements for Agriculture in Alberta](#)). Further, the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* can designate land as being agricultural via regional plans. As well, recent amendments to the *Municipal Government Act* are designed to facilitate and improve intermunicipal planning and cooperation (for all municipalities, not just major urban centres).

However, much work remains to be done on the policy and implementation front. The ELC has a key role in the development and implementation of the legislative, regulatory and policy framework to move from conversion to conservation of agricultural lands. The ELC will work to achieve clear policy direction at the provincial level which supports the conservation of agricultural land and is guided by environmental principles.

For example, as indicated in [Conservation Easements for Agriculture in Alberta](#), with respect to conservation easements (page 51):

Of the six possible Purpose Categories, environment, food production, and culture should be the basis of the Government of Alberta policy on conservation easements for agriculture. To put those into the context of “the protection of agricultural land and land for agricultural purposes”, the following articulation is proposed:

1. Sustainable agriculture – protection of the lands where Alberta’s agricultural and environmental systems positively intersect;
2. Food production – conservation of Alberta’s food growing capacity; and
3. Agricultural heritage – preservation of Alberta’s agricultural heritage and associated rural

culture.

While Government of Alberta policy is needed, it should be articulated at a high level as “very specific policy direction at the state level would confound the ability of [conservation easements] for agriculture programs to adapt to unique and evolving circumstances” (page 53).

The ELC will explore the challenges and opportunities for moving from conversion to conservation and stopping the loss of agricultural lands. This means looking at the existing tools within the *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* and the new tools within the *Municipal Government Act* to ensure coordinated, synergistic use of these tools leading to improved energy and food resilience and smart, sustainable urban development.

ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CENTRE:

The Environmental Law Centre (ELC) has been seeking strong and effective environmental laws since it was founded in 1982. The ELC is dedicated to providing credible, comprehensive and objective legal information regarding natural resources, energy and environmental law, policy and regulation in Alberta. The ELC’s mission is to educate and champion for strong laws and rights so all Albertans can enjoy clean water, clean air and a healthy environment. Our vision is a society where laws secure an environment that sustains current and future generations.

*As a charity, the Environmental Law Centre depends on your financial support. [Help us](#) to continue to educate and champion for strong environmental laws, through tools such as [our blog](#) and all of [our other resources](#), so that all Albertans can enjoy a healthy environment. **Your support makes a difference.** [Donate online today](#)*

Share this: