

# Alberta's Agricultural Lands: A Policy Toolbox for Moving from Conversion to Conservation



Environmental  
Law Centre

ELC Webinar Presentation on February 16, 2021

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- 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 the Province of 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.



# ELC's Agricultural Lands Project

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*Photos are provided courtesy ELC, unsplash.com and pixabay.com*

The cover image of the report, showing a field of tall grasses at sunset or sunrise, with a green semi-transparent box overlaid on the right side containing the title and author information.

## Alberta's Agricultural Lands: A Policy Toolbox for Moving from Conversion to Conservation

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# Presentation Outline

- Agricultural lands in Alberta
- The Primary Toolbox: Land Use Planning
- The Supplemental Toolbox: Incentives & Supports

# Conserving Agricultural Lands

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## Sustaining Ecological Services

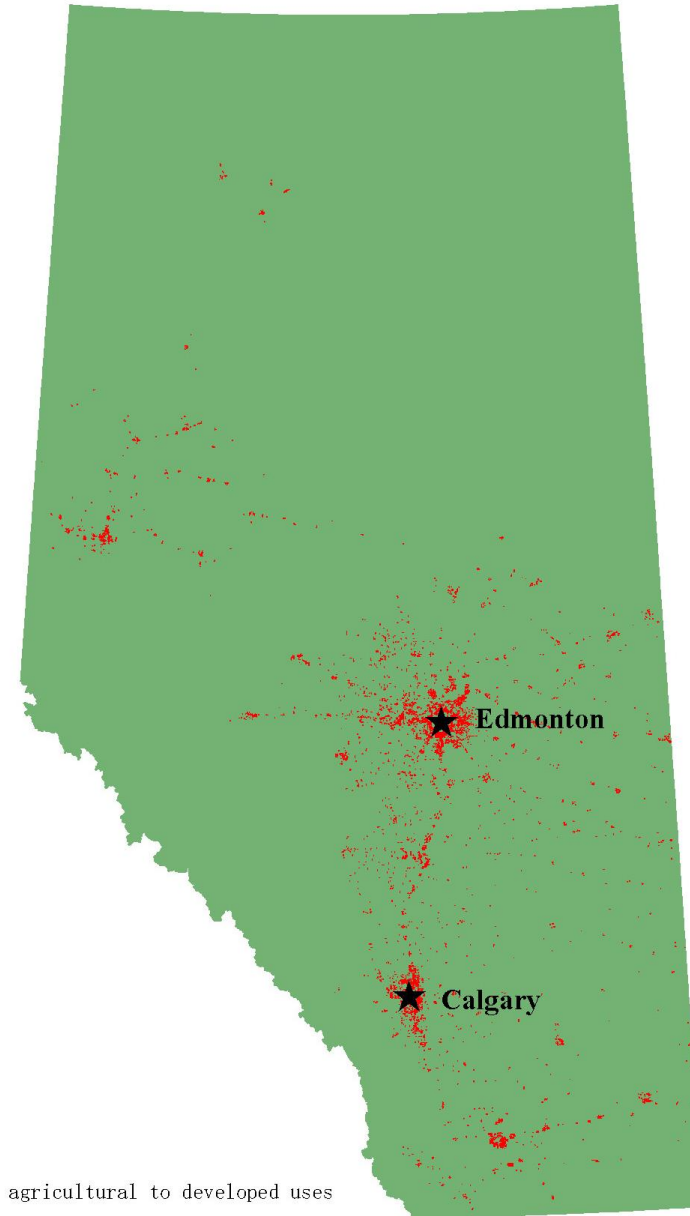
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# Agricultural Lands in Alberta

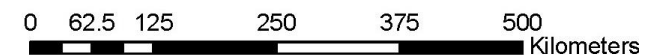
- Loss and fragmentation of agricultural lands ongoing for decades
- Impacts on rural landscapes, local food production, loss of high-quality soil, and economic inefficiencies
- Environmental consequences
  - loss of wildlife habitat and open space
  - loss of biodiversity
  - pollution
- Development and population growth contribute to loss and fragmentation – so does increased farmland prices

Source: Map prepared by Ziwei Hu, University of Alberta Department of Resource Economics and Environmental Sociology, on the basis of boundaries provided by Open Government (Canada) and land use data provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Annual Crop Inventory for 2000 and 2018.



**Legend**

-  Land been converted from agricultural to developed uses
-  Province of Alberta



# How do we stop the loss and fragmentation of Alberta's agricultural lands?

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# The Primary Toolbox: Land Use Planning

- *Alberta Land Stewardship Act (ALSA)*
  - Regional planning
  - Stewardship tools
- *Municipal Government Act (MGA)*
  - Municipal planning tools
  - Inter-municipal planning tools

From Land Use Planning Hub <https://landusehub.ca/resources/>



# Land Use Planning Recommendations: The Best Option, Agricultural Reserve

- regulated agricultural reserve with accompanying rural-urban buffer
- within agricultural reserve, restricted to agricultural uses (includes ranching)
- within rural-urban buffer, broader range of activities compatible with agriculture: food processing, agricultural service businesses, agricultural parks
- legislation identifies acceptable activities, also clear legislated targets and goals
- Agricultural Lands Commission: proactive engagement in planning and fostering agricultural lands

➤ **new legislation**

# Land Use Planning Recommendations: Alternatives to Agricultural Reserve

- ALSA & sub-regional agricultural plans
    - mandate municipal assessment and conservation
    - binding sub-regional plans
  - MGA & inter-municipal planning
    - inter-municipal planning includes growth plans, inter-municipal development plans, inter-municipal collaboration plans
    - most potential growth plans -> encompass several municipalities, enforceable, approved by Minister
    - secure with conservation easements for agricultural lands
- **use existing legislation with more intention and direction**
- **support land use planning with Agricultural Impact Assessment**

# The Supplemental Toolbox: Incentives & Supports

- Broad Range of Tools which **enhance** overall planning approaches
- Cannot replace wholistic planning approach
  - Piecemeal
  - Often voluntary
  - Designed to incentivize desirable behaviours (but not necessarily require)
- Financial Inducements
  - payment for EGS, tax benefits, cross compliance programs
- Other Support
  - agricultural development offices, agri-tourism, agro-food parks, regional procurement policies, farmland trusts, agricultural funds



# Incentives & Supports Recommendations

Existing tools need improvement:

- ALSA stewardship tools suffer from a lack of regulation and supporting policy (offsets, TDC schemes, stewardship units)
- tax benefits could be improved by creating a program for agricultural gifts (similar to eco-gifts)
- claw back of tax benefits upon conversion of agricultural lands
- province wide payment for EGS program (like PEI)
- provincial certification and labelling schemes

# Incentives & Supports Recommendations

Consider new tools:

- Cross Compliance Programs (e.g. Europe and Quebec)
- Regional Farmland Trust (clarify charitable purposes and activities)
- Regional Agricultural Fund
- Regional Procurement Policies
- Agri-tourism, Agro-food parks
- Agricultural development offices and liaison officers

# Questions?

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