



Sprawl eating away at prime farmland

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At the same time, demand for locally grown food is on the rise, says Agricultural Action Committee

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Prime farmland in the greater Toronto region is being gobbled up by urban sprawl at the same time that consumer demand for locally grown food is on the rise, says an agricultural expert.

"Assuming sprawl will continue, it will eat up the better land in the GTA," Elbert van Donkersgoed, executive director of the Greater Toronto Area Agricultural Action Committee, said yesterday.

The greenbelt protections in the GTA – forbidding development on a tract of land that rings the region – do not protect much of the best quality farmland, van Donkersgoed said at a breakfast session of the Canadian Urban Institute.

"We have created a protected countryside. We have also left a whole chunk of the countryside unprotected."

At the same time, van Donkersgoed said, food sales are dominated by large grocery stores with a national buying system that does not particularly benefit local farmers. Instead, he said, most grocery chains believe consumers will accept foreign-grown food as long as it is cheap and plentiful.

Van Donkersgoed said consumers are increasingly demanding local food – while in season – yet most supermarkets are not tapping into this new shift in buyer awareness.

"The food system has a lot of changes coming if it is going to meet new consumer needs," he said.

The Agricultural Action Committee is a partnership of municipalities, government agencies, agriculture groups and food associations. An action plan on agricultural issues was released in 2005, and the committee was struck the following year to push the issues with government and the public. Van Donkersgoed said the committee's greatest success so far has been putting the issue on the public's radar.

New related businesses are emerging. For example, foodkm.com allows consumers to type in their postal code for a list of farmers and shops selling locally grown food in their region. As well, Toronto stores such as Culinarium and Farmer's Daughter sell food grown on nearby farms.

"We haven't created these businesses, but we've helped create the climate that these kind of things are being thought about by entrepreneurs and others," van Donkersgoed said in an interview.

Consumers have also made it clear that they want the convenience of buying local food at their grocery store, whether it is fresh fruit in season, or canned in the winter.

In England, major chain Tesco has moved toward local farmers, creating four regional buying centres. "It is an excellent step forward," he said.

A spokesperson for the Metro chain, which owns 158 major grocery stores in Ontario, including A&P, Dominion and Loeb, said that 50 per cent of the chain's produce is from Ontario, depending on the weather that growing season. The chain does not use the term "locally grown," the spokesperson said.

In an August news release, Loblaws said it purchased \$750 million of Canadian-grown produce in 2007, roughly 25 per cent of its total produce selection.