The Agricultural Systems Approach:

Application in Oxford County

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Section 1: Introduction and Purpose:

This report has been prepared to support Oxford County and its approach to agricultural land-use planning by implementing the provincial Agricultural Systems Approach policy. The goal and purpose of the report is to identify practical, implementable policy options that strengthen Oxford County's Official Plan 269, and align it with the current directions of the 2024 Provincial Planning Statement (PPS). The focus is on strengthening how agricultural land use planning supports long-term agricultural viability, which entails ensuring that the agricultural land base, the agri-food network, and the infrastructure and services work together to support one another. This report is guided by the policies in the Provincial Planning Statement, 2024, which establishes the policy direction for municipal land-use decision-making across Ontario. Municipal planning decisions must be consistent with the PPS, and the Official Plans are the direct implementation of these policies in a community or region. One of the new updates in the 2024 PPS was the requirement for planning authorities to use an Agricultural Systems approach to maintain a geographically continuous agricultural land base and support the long-term economic development of the agri-food network (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2024, p. 23). Some of the other goals of the PPS include:

- Protection of prime agricultural areas for long-term use
- Support for agricultural uses, agriculture-related uses, and on-farm diversified uses
- Coordination between land use planning, infrastructure and economic development
- Integration of planning across municipal boundaries

As required by the 2024 PPS, the Agricultural Systems Approach is a guide for planning to support agriculture as an integrated system. The two main components of the approach are the Agricultural Land Base and Agri-Food Network. An agricultural land base consists of prime

agricultural areas, including specialty crop areas, and rural lands (which do not apply to Oxford County), creating a continuous, productive agricultural area (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2024, p. 39) An agri-food network are the farms, infrastructure, services, and assets that are important to the viability of the agri-food sector (Government of Ontario, 2022). The PPS requires that these components be planned together to maintain agricultural viability over the long term, which entails that the land remains protected, agri-food businesses are supported, and infrastructure and land-use decisions are coordinated. Oxford County has a strong agricultural foundation and a comprehensive land use policy framework. Almost 87% of the total land area is prime agricultural land, with much of it classified as Class 1 and Class 2 farmland (Oxford County, “Agriculture”). It is a key component of the county and provides much of the area's economic development. Farm operations, processing, and related businesses contribute to employment, local investment and economic stability.

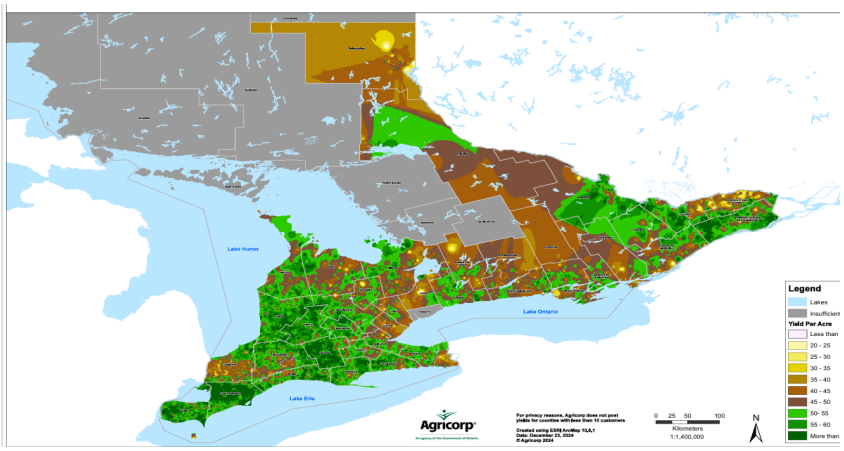
The report is organized to help move from policy direction to local application and implementation. Section 2 outlines Oxford County’s agricultural and economic context. Section 3 summarizes the Agricultural Systems Approach and the relevant policies of the 2024 PPS. Section 4 will review selected Ontario case studies and identify some of the best practices associated with them. Section 5 will then present recommendations and implementation options, and Section 6 will provide concluding observations and next steps.

Section 2: Oxford County's Agricultural and Economic Context:

Oxford County is located centrally within Southwestern Ontario. Agricultural land accounts for the largest share of land use in Oxford, with approximately 432,756 acres under cultivation as of the 2021 Census. Much of that farmland is used for cropping (380,190 acres), with the remainder in pasture (10,351 acres) and for farm infrastructure, such as barns and shops. Oxford County punches above its weight when it comes to contributions to Ontario's GDP. Despite making up 11.2% of the farmland in Southern Ontario, Oxford County contributes 14% of Southern Ontario's agri-food GDP (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs 2021, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs 2021b).

Agriculture is strong in Oxford, due in part to the high-quality soils available to farmers. Approximately 90% of soils within Oxford County are prime agricultural soils (Classes 1, 2, and 3), with the vast majority being Classes 1 and 2. (Oxford County, "Agriculture."). The soil capability for agriculture doesn't tell the whole story either. Oxford County has extremely high-quality soil and consistently ranks among the highest in the province for corn and soybean yields, indicating strong soil fertility and favourable growing conditions. Figure 1 highlights these yields, showing a map of them compared to other regions in the province.

Figure 1: Soybean yields in the province of Ontario in 2024, as reported to Agricorp production insurance. (Agricorp, 2025.)



Oxford County averaged 58 bushels per acre in soybeans in 2024, compared to the provincial average of 53. For corn yields, Oxford averaged 224 bushels per acre, compared to the provincial average of 204 bushels per acre (Agricorp 2025b). Oxford County has a large number of livestock operations, with dairy predominating, followed by hog and poultry operations (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs 2021). Oxford County's dairy sector is the top producer of milk in Ontario, with 306 producers as of 2020 producing 381 million litres; 12 percent of Ontario's milk (Farmers Forum, 2020). The dairy, grains, and oilseed sectors work hand in hand with the dairy sector, providing feed to cattle, and cattle manure is also used to help maintain the high soil fertility in the area. Anecdotally, an OFA Zone director mentioned that synthetic nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers are not relied upon as much in counties with high livestock numbers because of the availability of manure. This would significantly shorten the supply chain for farm inputs while reducing reliance on fossil-fuel-derived fertilizers such as urea.

Collectively, Oxford County's contribution to Ontario's GDP through its agrifood sector is $2.6 billion of the province's $49 billion (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2021). As mentioned previously, dairy represents the largest economic contribution to the agri-food sector in Oxford County, ahead of hogs and poultry. The county is also a large producer of grains and oilseeds (Ontario Federation of Agriculture, 2024). Oxford County is home to over 2,009 farms and 432,756 acres of farmland. From this production, they cultivate a 46% surplus in crop products and a 71% surplus in animal products (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2021). Oxford is also home to several food-processing industries, which accounted for $420.5 million in sales in 2022. Food processing businesses also purchased just under $64 million in goods in 2022, with 78% of the sales remaining local (Rural

Oxford Economic Development Corporation, 2025, pp. 4-5). Oxford County's agricultural economy is both highly productive and already integrated into local processing activities, positioning it well for a formal Agricultural Systems Approach.

Section 3: Agricultural Systems Approach and the 2024 PPS:

The Provincial Planning Statement, 2024 (PPS 2024), establishes the Agricultural Systems Approach as a requirement for land use planning across Ontario. It was originally a requirement only in the Greater Golden Horseshoe; this approach is now required province-wide to allow for a consistent agricultural policy across Ontario. The Agricultural Systems Approach is built on earlier land protection policies, started in 1976 with *A Strategy for Ontario Farmland,* which was the first land use planning policy conceived to maintain a permanent, secure, and economically viable agricultural land base (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2020, p. 6). Farmland protections grew from there; however, the term "agricultural systems approach" was first used in the Greenbelt Plan in 2005 to ensure that a continuous and permanent land base and its agrifood network were present to support long-term agricultural production and economic activity (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2020, p. 6). The PPS, 2024, defines an agricultural system as:

- The agricultural land base (prime agricultural areas and rural lands)
- The agri-food network (infrastructure, services, and activities supporting agriculture) (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2024, p. 39)

The agricultural systems approach also represents a shift from traditional land-use planning principles that focus on farmland preservation to a more market-oriented approach, linking farmland protection with policies that enable agricultural competitiveness, investment, and the growth of the agri-food sector. Protecting prime agricultural land is the main goal, but promoting agricultural production as a part of the broader agri-food system and as a part of an economic engine, functioning together as an integrated agricultural system (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2024, p. 23). Provincial guidance emphasizes that the

Agricultural Systems approach is intended to ensure that farmland and agri-food systems coexist and scale with growth, and to support a competitive agri-food sector (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2020, p. 6). Further, the agricultural systems approach seeks to integrate related disciplines, such as economic development and land-use planning, to better account for impacts on both the land base and the agri-food system.

Oxford County already aligns strongly with the conservation ideas of the agricultural land base component through its Official Plan Amendment No. 269 (OPA 269), which already:

- Designates all lands outside settlement areas as Agricultural Reserve;
- Prioritizes long-term protection of prime agricultural areas; and
- Supports agricultural-related and on-farm diversified uses
    - (Oxford County, 2022, OPA 269, s. 1.0, s 3.1)

Oxford County is on the right track for land protection, with the existing mapping and the designation of all lands outside the settlement areas as prime agricultural. A well-designed planning policy is in place to help protect the designated farmland, for example, restricted development on prime agricultural land and the use of agricultural impact assessments for settlement area boundary expansions. Research from Caldwell et al. (2022) highlights that most (76%) of prime agricultural land loss in Southern Ontario occurs through large-scale settlement area expansions, which highlights the importance of agriculture-supportive housing and commercial development policies such as encouraging infill development, strong density targets, promoting mixed-use, walkable areas etc. to reduce settlement area boundary expansions. There is additional work for the County to do now to meet the new requirements of PPS 2024, which will require it to adapt its plan to align with the identification, enabling, and support of the

agri-food network. To achieve this, it must support the processing, distribution, and marketing of products, strengthen connections across the network, support enabling infrastructure for agricultural and agri-food production across the value chain, and better align and balance land-use planning with economic development priorities (Ontario, 2022). Rather than rewriting policies to better align with the PPS 2024, it is a matter of broadening the scope of how they can achieve an agricultural systems approach beyond protecting agricultural land, to supporting the broader agricultural system.

Section 4: Case Studies:

Four different municipalities that have incorporated elements of the ASA through their planning frameworks were compared across Ontario. We selected examples from across the province to represent a range of approaches. York Region was the first chosen, due to its strong agrifood economy and processing cluster, as well as its well-put-together report on its agricultural systems approach, which highlighted the economic development aspects. Durham Region was chosen second for also having an excellent report, and having a very strong approach to agrifood sector policy, as well as a full-time staff member hired as the Agriculture Economic Development Specialist. Third chosen was Leeds and Grenville County for being on the far East of the province, their strong use of LEAR mapping (Land Evaluation, Area Review), and their extensive consultation process with the community. Lastly, Essex was chosen for its location on the far West of the province, its similar land quality, and the fact that all land outside the settlement areas is prime agricultural land. Each municipality is discussed in further detail below.

York Region, Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy (2024-2027):

York Region has one of the best examples of how municipalities use the agricultural systems approach to promote economic development through smart land use, owing to its strong processing sector and its economic development framework within the ASA. It is not a planning document directly under the Planning Act or the Official Plan, but rather a Council-approved economic development strategy that acts as a guideline. It aligns with the York Region Official Plan, but it remains separate from it and does not carry direct policy weight. York Region's Agricultural and Agri-Food Sector Strategy is transforming all sectors of the food sector through

a structured, implementation-oriented approach. The three pillars that York has built their policy upon are:

- **Business, Entrepreneurship and Innovation**
- **Resilient and Diverse Local Agri-Food Value Chain**
- **Outreach, Education, and Communication**

Each pillar is supported by three goals and a total of 27 actions, which provide a clear, defined framework for achieving these goals (Regional Municipality of York, pp. vi -vii). They are built on the idea that a viable agricultural system requires all industries in the food network to work together toward a common goal, aligning with the PPS' definition of an Agricultural System consisting of an agricultural land base and agri-food network. York Region's agri-food sector contributes approximately 3.8 billion to the GDP. It includes nearly 5000 businesses, making it one of the largest industries in the Greater Toronto Area, and the 4th largest agrifood processing area in Canada (Regional Municipality of York, 2024, p. vi).

What York Region is doing well:

1. A defined and time-dependent strategy for the next steps and goals of the region. In their strategic plan, they have three pillars, each with multiple assigned goals. Within these goals, they have a timeline detailing when these goals will be attempted to be completed, as well as the expected outcomes and potential partners who could help implement the strategy (Regional Municipality of York, 2024, pp. 42-54). Working with local businesses is exactly the point of an agri-food systems approach, and establishing direct partnerships with organizations that can help is one of the best steps to strengthen your alignment with food systems and the 2024 PPS.

2. A direct integration with Economic Development in achieving the goals. While Economic Development and Planners often work together, they sometimes have competing goals and differences in responsibilities. York Region's agriculture and agrifood sector strategy does not make land preservation its agricultural policy, perhaps because much of York Region is in the Greenbelt. York Region is more involved in economic development, promoting business expansion and innovation, as well as workforce development (Regional Municipality of York, 2024, pp. 43-46). This integrated approach supports the idea that the agricultural system is also an economic one.

3. Supporting local food systems and diversification. Working alongside farms of different scales and treating them all equally as partners in the food chain is important for reaching consumers (Regional Municipality of York, 2024, p. 47). York Region has access to millions of potential customers, and having a space where farmers can sell their produce and promote local businesses is essential to an integrated approach.

4. Strong partnerships and local commissions. York Region has an Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee and extensive shareholder engagement (200+ participants), which helps guide strategy development and implementation with policymakers (Regional Municipality of York, 2024, pp. 8-10).

What York Region could improve:

1. Better integration with land-use policies. While their policies are very strong in supporting the agri-food sector economically, they are less focused on land-use preservation and official planning policies, which makes sense, as their main agriculture document is meant to serve as a guideline for economic development and the agricultural food system. Planning

decisions have shifted to lower-tier municipalities (Regional Municipality of York, 2024, p. 5), which typically have lower capacity to support the agrifood system than upper-tier municipalities (Zink et al., 2022). Though York Region is densely populated, its planning decisions are likely to be made by each lower-tier municipality, including large suburban municipalities like Vaughan and Markham, as well as smaller communities like King Township.

2. Limited mapping use. Other municipalities are more involved in their GIS and in mapping their agri-food network. This can limit their ability to visualize where investments and infrastructure needs are placed, and something that they could consider more.

3. Broad actions are harder to implement locally. While the actions are very clear and well-defined, they may be beyond some municipalities' realistic capacity to achieve. This is one of the challenges of working with a large region, as Oxford County will not have the same level of funding. investments, and community involvement as a larger region like York has.

Application to Oxford County:

1. Develop a local agri-food plan. Oxford could adopt a scaled-down version of York Region's pillars, focusing on supporting local food businesses and processors, enhancing connectivity between rural producers and urban consumers, and promoting local-food-based entrepreneurship.

2. Introduce measurable actions and goals. Oxford could assign responsibility to specific departments or planners (e.g., each township planner in Oxford is responsible for their area

and works with the ROEDC on a commission to develop an agri-food systems approach). Define timelines and track outcomes, such as the number of businesses supported or local food initiatives launched.

3. Strengthen urban and rural linkages. Woodstock is perfectly positioned to support farmers' markets, food hubs, and distribution hubs (which it already does), but supporting local businesses is the number-one priority for economic development. Encourage and promote small and medium-sized businesses in agri-food systems through events and promotions in local supermarkets (e.g., establish in-store deals with local grocery stores to promote local products so customers see local produce first).

4. Focus on partnerships rather than capacity. Oxford County is smaller than York Region and does not have the same potential for partnerships. They should focus on working with local organizations, including the Woodstock Chamber of Commerce, OMAFA, ROEDC, and other small businesses. These goals will help them transition into an agri-foods system approach.

Leeds and Grenville, LEAR-Based Agricultural Systems Approach:

Leeds and Grenville use a modified approach to Land Evaluation and Area Review (LEAR). The use of this technology aligns with provincial standards for identifying and protecting agricultural areas, with statistical data as the primary approach (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, p. 5). The LEAR system combines the LE (Land Evaluation) and AR (Area Review). Land evaluation assesses soil quality using Canada Land Inventory classifications and climatic considerations, and Area Review is a contextual factor that looks at fragmentation and land use/production. Combining both approaches allows mapping to reflect pragmatism

regarding the capacity of the land and agricultural systems, and to evaluate more than just the soil (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, p. 5).

Some of the methodologies they use include grid-sized evaluation units, which are 100-acre polygons, as well as a 750m boundary surrounding each unit (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, p. 6). They also use a weighted score for the LEAR, with 60% allocated to the Land Evaluation and 40% to the Area Review. Within the 40%, 10% is allocated to fragmentation, and the remaining 30% is weighted toward agricultural lands (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, p. 15). The use of "lands in production" is also important, as it indicates that active farming can occur even on lower-class soils, which is not an issue in Oxford County at all, but is important to include (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, pp. 10-11).

Another strength of the Leeds and Grenville approach is the variety of community consultations that they engage with. This is above the average of what is expected with consultations, as they engaged with:

- County and local municipal staff
- OMAFRA representatives
- A Technical Advisory Group (TAG)
- Agricultural organizations
- The Planning Advisory Committee (PAC)
- The general public can attend open houses and meetings
    - (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, p. 2).

The consultation process involved multiple stages and was meticulously overseen by the PAC. It was expanded by an additional five months from the request (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, p. 2). Once the PAC issued its recommendations in 2023, Stage 4 was initiated, and over 200 property owners participated in the process. To help facilitate this, Leeds and Grenville uploaded the GIS viewer so that residents could view their property assessments and identify concerns (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, p. 25). Having this level of engagement ensures that the community feels they were actively consulted and had a voice in planning decisions, that landowner concerns were directly addressed, and that policy outcomes would be accepted and followed by residents.

Practical Implication Model:

The success of Leeds and Grenville lies in the use of mapping to influence policies and involve the community in the planning process, as well as in the importance of consultation when making community-led decisions. After generating the original LEAR analysis, the county refined their maps through feedback, including:

- Excluding identifiable natural heritage features where appropriate
- Including the current OP prime agricultural designation areas
- Include areas at the request of landowners where lands that don't meet the minimum 60-score threshold but are important to the agricultural fabric of the counties.
    - (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, p. 23).

The standardization of the mapping improved consistency and transparency of agricultural land identification, creating a space where community and technical consultation were equally considered. (Leeds and Grenville Agricultural Area Review, 2024, pp. 23-24).

While a score of 60 was used to identify candidate agricultural lands, the county allowed refinements based on community consultation, regardless of whether the lands met the threshold.

Application to Oxford County:

1. Adopting the use of LEAR as an idea, but not as a final way to make decisions. It should be used to map out the agricultural area. However, the truth is that most of Oxford County is prime agricultural land, meaning they would be less concerned about soil quality, as most of it is already ideal for agriculture.

2. Introduce a clear and consultative framework for establishing an Agricultural Systems Approach. Oxford could definitely benefit from targeted engagement with farmers and landowners and from communicating how the input influences outcomes.

3. Recognizing the importance of "Lands in Production." While Oxford's lands are highly productive, incorporating active farming into policymaking is the best way to ensure the community feels involved and heard regarding their concerns.

4. Importance of consultation. This one is obvious and applies to all case studies, but allocating more time to address community concerns and questions is the best way to measure an initiative's success, as they are the ones most affected by agricultural policies.

Durham Region, Growing Agri Food Durham Plan 2023-2027:

The approach taken by Durham Region puts coordination and economic outcomes at the forefront of its agricultural strategy. Like other ASA strategies, the region promotes agriculture as part of a collective system of businesses, infrastructure, and partnerships that drive economic development. Durham prioritizes how the agri-food system functions in practice over policy structures and mapping, where producers connect to processors, where local food reaches markets and how municipalities can support these relationships.

One of Durham Region's biggest strengths is its dedicated Agricultural Economic Development specialist within the economic development department. Like other economic development professionals, they are involved in a region's economic sustainability, but they are specifically tied to Durham's agriculture. With a dedicated agricultural economic development specialist, the agricultural industry is treated as an important stakeholder in Durham Region's economy rather than influencing land-use policies. The region notes that the success of its agri-food network is a key contributor to the agri-food economy's success (Durham Region, 2023, p. 55).

Their strategies also put logistics at the forefront of improving the agricultural industry's economic performance. Some of the steps they have been taking include expanding their on-farm diversification and improving linkages within the agricultural system among producers, processors, and markets. They also prioritize supporting their local food systems and supply chains to grow their economies and promote agri-tourism (Durham Region, 2023, pp. 45, 52, 55). The Region has been studying broader future trends as well, including increasing farm consolidation and intensification, technological adoption, and rising farmland values, all of

which pose threats to long-term agricultural viability. Because of this, Durham has been focusing on supporting the systems through economic development initiatives. Another strength of Durham Region's strategy has been its implementation strategies. They have a structured action plan with clearly defined goal areas and roles for municipal staff and partner organizations. This is very similar to what York Region has done as well, and including goal charts in the document is one of the best ways to visualize exactly what has been done, what needs to be done, and the outcomes after completion.

Suggested Initiatives:

1. Integrating Economic Development and Land Use Planning. This option was one of the strengths of Durham Region's approach to agricultural systems. The ROEDC has also done similar things to this already, but having more staff and a dedicated planner to work with them for agricultural land use planning could be a potential next step for the county to plan for the future and to help alleviate the coverage of the ROEDC, which only has 1-2 full-time staff on the team.

2. Strengthening the Agri-Food Network. Durham Region has been heavily involved in the logistics and sector coordination as part of its agri-food approach. Oxford County is well-positioned to serve as a logistics hub for the agri-food sector, thanks to its location and proximity to major metropolitan regions and transportation corridors.

3. Enhancing Implementation Capacity. Given that Oxford County is an upper-tier municipality with limited local planning capacity, a dedicated organization focused on agri-food systems could improve coordination among townships and regions within the County. This could be

done through the ROEDC, but this would likely require more funding and more staff to work alongside them.

County of Essex, Specialty Crop Areas:

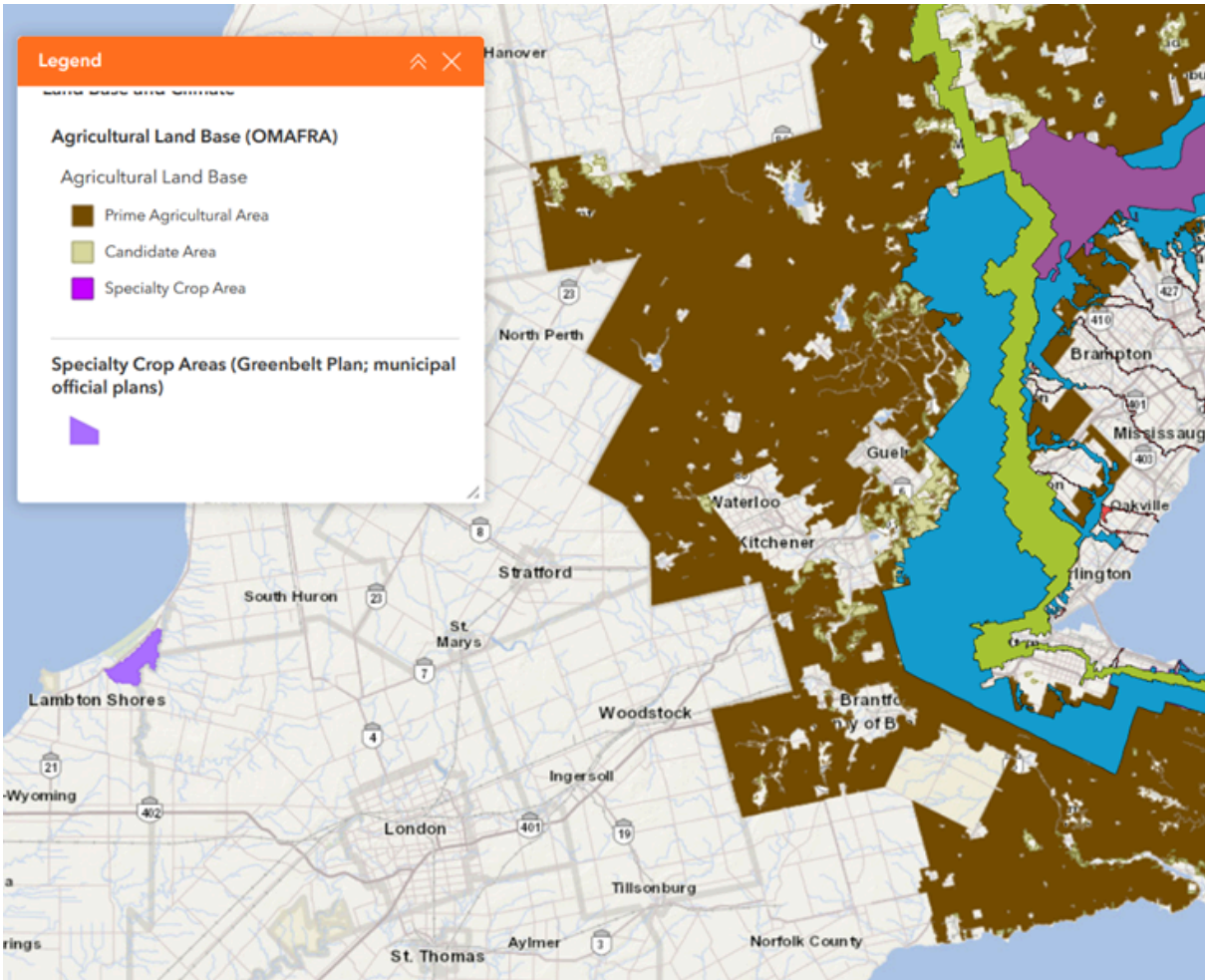
The County of Essex's Official Plan (2024) is very explicit about the geographic and climatic advantages it has over other regions in Ontario, citing its mild climate and high-quality soils. The plan acknowledges that these conditions create significant potential for high-value agricultural production and associated agri-food activities (County of Essex, 2024, pp. 60-61). To support this, Essex has committed to conducting a formal Specialty Crop Study to identify and map specialty crop areas across the county. The county is working very closely with municipalities, highlighting how important communication and cooperation is to support the agrifood system to its fullest potential. Once this is completed, it will be used to create future Official Plan amendments that incorporate precise land-use designations and policies tailored to these areas. The goals of these policies are to protect specialty crop lands from non-agricultural uses, restrict the expansion of settlement areas within these lands, and require that these lands be used to their fullest agricultural potential (County of Essex, 2024, p. 60). Specialty crop lands benefit from the highest levels of agricultural land protection in Ontario, which is worth considering if Oxford County is looking to improve protections in certain high-producing areas.

The strength of Essex's approach is that they look to the future in its policy direction. They recognize that specialty crop areas are a distinct and high-priority agricultural resource and additionally link these areas to supporting other infrastructure (natural gas, irrigation, processing). They also commit to evidence-based planning through future studies and mapping plans. However, Essex has not fully implemented the Agricultural Systems Approach and is still

in a preliminary stage rather than one used in practice. Specialty crop areas are not currently mapped and, compared to Grey County's apple-growing area and Lambton County's Thedford Marsh, are not part of a provincially approved official plan (Government of Ontario, 2025). Their policy is reliant on future studies rather than immediate application tools, making their approach policy-aligned but not fully operationalized.

As a result, the County of Essex provides an example of how Oxford can strengthen its approach to specialty crop areas through an Agricultural Systems Approach. First, the County can identify and define specialty crop areas. Through a specialty crop area study, they could identify areas with concentrations of dairy processing inputs, vegetable production, and emerging specialty or value-added crops. On Agri-Maps, the Agricultural Land Base legend shows mapped land bases across the Greater Golden Horseshoe, but Oxford County is not yet mapped.

Figure 2: A screenshot of the Agricultural Land Base on AgriMaps.



Having these regions mapped out would provide immense value in determining where policies should go and in promoting the agri-food system. Oxford could go further by linking these areas to agri-food infrastructure, processing clusters, and transportation corridors. Some of these producers are already linked on the map, but a fully intuitive version would work best for this. Oxford could also enhance existing policies by explicitly designating potential specialty-crop areas as high-priority agricultural lands and restricting non-farm uses. But since they are already preserving farmland, this would work best alongside a mapping plan. In short, the County of Essex has taken steps forward to identify and protect its specialty crop areas. The reliance on future studies is its weakness. Still, it shows that policy implementation is necessary for success in an ASA and should be prioritized when developing an agri-food plan. Oxford County is well-positioned to build on this model through identification and mapping work, and coordinated planning with different administrations.

Section 5: Recommendations and Implementation Options:

Through the four case studies, several consistent themes emerge that can inform how Oxford County refines its Agricultural Systems Approach. These recommendations range from strengthening implementation, improving coordination and building Oxford's already strong agricultural land base. From these studies, we have six recommendations and implementation options for Oxford County that we believe will help Oxford develop a comprehensive Agricultural Systems Approach, aligned with the PPS, 2024.

1. Establishing a Coordinated Agri-Food Systems Framework:

A key lesson across all the case studies has been the importance of moving beyond policies to a coordinated, system-wide approach. York and Durham Region have been the best examples of this, demonstrating how clearly defined strategies, goals, and actions can guide implementation and align all stakeholders. Oxford County should develop a county-wide agri-foods network that:

- Defines the priorities for the agricultural land base, agri-food network and infrastructure
- Establishes clear goals, timelines, and measurable outcomes
- Identifies roles for the county, area municipalities, and partner organizations

One of the ways that this could take form is through a properly scaled, Oxford-specific agri-food strategy, building on York's pillar-based model while remaining realistic for local capacity (Regional Municipality of York, pp. vi-vii)

2. Strengthening Integration Between Planning and Economic Development:

Durham Region is one of the best examples of this. Having a dedicated agricultural economic development professional on staff aligns with the ASA's goal to integrate agriculture and related industries into a harmonized economic system. Although the ROEDC is already involved in this, perhaps a dedicated person within Oxford County's planning department would enable stronger coordination and collaboration between the agricultural industry and economic development. Oxford County should:

- Strengthening coordination between planning staff and the Rural Oxford Economic Development Corporation (ROEDC)
- Consider introducing a dedicated agri-food systems role or shared initiative
- Align land use planning decisions in agriculture with economic development priorities.

While the ROEDC already supports aspects of the agri-food sector, additional capacity would help move from policy protection to active system management, like what has been done in Durham Region (Durham Region, 2023, p. 55)

3. Advance Agricultural Systems Mapping and Data Tools:

Leeds and Grenville demonstrate the value of evidence-based mapping and analysis when supporting agricultural systems planning. Oxford County should:

- Develop an Agricultural Systems Map that integrates:
    - Agricultural land base
    - Agri-food network (processing, distribution, services)
    - Key infrastructure (transportation, servicing)

- Incorporate data on lands in production, not just soil capability
- Use mapping tools to support decision-making, policy refinement, and stakeholder engagement
- OMAFA's Agricultural Systems Portal is a useful tool for identifying and mapping types of cropping, processing, farm supplies and other agrifood network features.
- In addition, Oxford should explore opportunities to integrate its agricultural system mapping with OMAFRA's AgriMaps, when possible. Aligning local data with provincial mapping would:
    - Standardize the mapping process with other municipalities
    - Enhance accessibility for all stakeholders
    - Support better coordination across jurisdictions and ministries
    - Provide a foundation for future updates and systems monitoring.

The strongest takeaway from the LEAR and GIS-Community-led process was the importance of transparency and public involvement when tools are accessible and their criteria and goals are clear (United Counties of Leeds and Grenville, 2024, pp. 5-6, 23-25). This would be especially helpful for community engagement and for building connections between agricultural producers and the broader agri-food system.

4. Identify and Support Specialty Crop Areas:

Recognizing specialty crop areas, as seen in the County of Essex, reflects the importance of identifying high-value agricultural assets, even where mapping is not fully developed. While it is generally used in high-value crop-based agriculture, the identification of key agricultural assets applies to grain and oilseed production systems. Oxford County has some of the most

productive dairy and cropland in the province, and should be treated as a very important part of the agri-economy. It could also be used to identify agri-processing, as both industries are interconnected and benefit from agglomeration. Oxford County could:

- Undertake a Specialty Crop Area Study to identify:
    - Clusters of high value or intensive production
    - Supporting infrastructure and processing opportunities
    - Integrate these areas into mapping and policy frameworks
    - Provide enhanced protection and targeted support for these lands

Oxford has the opportunity to move directly from identification to implementation in its ASA, ensuring that specialty crop areas are defined and linked to the agri-food system planning.

5. Strengthening the Agri-Food Network and Value Chain:

Across all case studies, the need to support connections among producers, processors, and markets is evident in the approaches. Oxford County should:

- Establish a coordinated task force focused on the agri-food system
- Improve coordination across area municipalities
- Assign responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of agricultural system initiatives
- Explore partnerships with:
    - OMAFRA
    - Local businesses and organizations

- Agricultural groups and advisory committees (ROEDC, Oxford County Federation of Agriculture)

The consultation process in Leeds and Grenville and the structured implementation models of their agricultural systems approach in Durham and York Region demonstrate the importance of ongoing coordination and stakeholder engagement in a thriving agri-food system. These initiatives would require some time to develop, but they can certainly be done at a smaller scale.

6. Prioritize Phased and Scalable Implementation:

Given the size of Oxford County and its access to resources, implementation should be phased and scalable to support growth.

- **Short Term:**
  - Coordinate and work more closely with the ROEDC
  - Initiate a community-led mapping process
  - Contact and coordinate engagement with potential partners and leaders
- **Medium Term:**
  - Complete and analyze a specialized crop study
  - Develop an agri-foods system strategy
  - If possible, hire an Agricultural-specialist for Rural Oxford
- **Long Term:**
  - Fully integrate mapping into policy decisions
  - Expand infrastructure and logistics investments
  - Monitor outcomes and refine policies

The most successful approaches in the case studies have been the refocusing from just protecting farmland to actively supporting and managing the agricultural system as an economic and functional network. Oxford County has the resources to take this next step by building on its strong policy foundation and advancing toward an integrated, implementation-focused Agricultural Systems Approach.

Section 6: Conclusion and Next Steps:

Oxford County already has a strong baseline for agricultural land use planning. Through OPA 269, the County has already established a detailed plan that effectively protects the agricultural land base and supports a range of agricultural, agriculture-related, and on-farm diversified uses, thereby aligning with the Agricultural Systems Approach and, broadly, the PPS, 2024. The ASA represents a refocusing in policy direction, as it requires municipalities to move beyond land protection and consider how the agri-food system functions. This includes integrating the agricultural land base with the agri-food network, as well as coordinating with infrastructure, economic development, and land-use planning decisions.

The case studies reviewed in this report highlight several consistent themes. York Region demonstrates the value of a structured, implementation-focused agri-food strategy. The use of community mapping and LEAR, as seen in Leeds and Grenville, supports the perspective that community engagement is just as important as classifications. Integrating economic development with specialized staff is also a great decision to help streamline the ASA process, as seen in Durham Region. The County of Essex highlights the need to identify and protect specialty crop areas, while also underscoring the limitations of policy approaches that will require future implementation. Long-term agricultural viability depends on a coordinated, integrated approach,

which is the goal of a collective agricultural plan like the ASA. Protecting the land base is very important, but this land protection must be complemented by policies that support the agri-food network and help it advance.

For Oxford County, the path forward should be incremental and build upon its existing strengths. Key opportunities include strengthening coordination between planning and economic development, advancing agricultural systems mapping, identifying and supporting specialty crop areas, and enhancing the municipal capacity across the County. These actions will support an approach that is better aligned with PPS 2024 and reflect agriculture as a land-use and economic system. The implementation should proceed in small but meaningful steps to respect the scope of the changes. Oxford could focus directly on community-led initiatives and on coordinating projects with engagement and feedback. Long-term projects can be directed towards GIS integration and resource expansion. With these suggestions, Oxford can adapt its land protection with an agricultural systems approach that integrates the agri-food system. Strengthening connections across the network and improving personal connections will support a resilient and competitive agricultural sector in the long term.

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