

Protected on Paper; Threatened in Practice

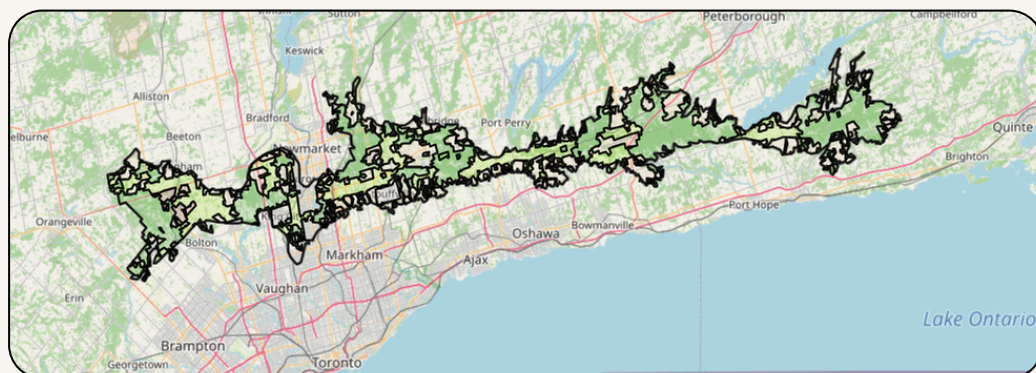
How local planning decisions are shaping the future of the Oak Ridges Moraine

The Oak Ridges Moraine at a Turning Point

Over the past two decades, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan (ORMCP) provided a stable, ecosystem-based framework that protected the Oak Ridges Moraine (ORM) from the worst effects of urban sprawl. **These protections are no longer the reality.**

Since 2018, a series of provincial policy changes has weakened many of the checks and balances that once helped uphold the ORMCP in the day-to-day decisions of local governments. So while the conservation plan remains formally unchanged, the systems that support and enforce it have been steadily eroded.

By reviewing proposals, documenting changes, and gathering community insight, Save the Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM) Coalition is documenting development patterns to better understand how development pressures are unfolding across the ORM.



A Vital Landscape Under Pressure

Often described as the ‘rain barrel’ of the Greater Toronto Area, the ORM is made up of layered sands, gravels, and soils that absorb rain and snowmelt, filter it underground, and release it slowly through springs, wetlands, and aquifers.

Urban sprawl, its infrastructure, and its associated pollutants remain the largest threat to the ORM. These impacts are cumulative, costly, difficult to reverse, and are being worsened by the effects of climate change. Protection and preservation is most effective means to ensure the ongoing ecological and hydrological integrity of the GTA.

The ORMCP has helped limit these risks, but pressure to weaken protections continues to grow as the ORM, along with its associated Greenbelt areas, is a target of real estate speculation.

One Landform Protecting the GTA



Fresh water
for over
7 million
residents



Conserves
731 km² of
dedicated
rural
lands



Protects
1,525 km² of
ecologically
rich forests
and wildlife
corridors



Increases
climate
change
resilience
and flood
protection

5 Planning Threats Compromising the Oak Ridges Moraine

1

Settlement Boundary Expansion

Protected lands are being targeted for removal or downgrading through settlement area boundary expansion requests.

2

Strategic Deferral

Key studies and mitigation measures are being delayed until after approval.

3

Commercial Creep

Rural and agricultural permissions are being stretched into higher-intensity commercial uses.

4

Malleable Language

Flexible policy wording is being used to weaken mandatory limits, buffers, and protections.

5

Incremental Fragmentation

Minor development approvals are adding up to larger patterns of habitat loss and urbanization.

These five threats do not operate in isolation. Together, they represent a pattern of incremental erosion that risks undermining the ecological and hydrological integrity of the Oak Ridges Moraine. Without coordinated action, the cumulative impact of these planning decisions could permanently compromise the landscape that millions of people depend on.



Protecting What Really Matters

Hold the Line



Uphold existing ORM and Greenbelt boundaries and designations.

Headwaters First



Protect recharge, baseflow, wetlands, and water quality as non-negotiable.

Accountable Governance



Require transparent, evidence-based, enforceable, and rights-respecting decisions.



Since 1989, Save the Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM) Coalition has been the leading grassroots voice protecting the ORM. We continue this work today by upholding the letter and spirit of the ORMCP through research, policy advocacy, education, and community outreach.

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