

Overview of the Land Evaluation and Area Review (LEAR) System for Agriculture

Since 1994, the Region's Agricultural/Rural land designation has been based on the soil capability for agriculture (Canada Land Inventory-CLI). Over the years, area municipal official plans have refined these designations based on local conditions and knowledge and the Provincial Policy Statement no longer recognizes CLI Class 4 lands as prime agricultural lands as part of their definition of "prime" lands.

Since many of the Greenbelt provisions rely on whether lands are considered to be "prime" agricultural lands, Regional staff is of the opinion that there is a need to re-examine the identification of agricultural lands in the Region. The Province has developed the Land Evaluation and Area Review (LEAR) System for Agriculture to be used as part of the comprehensive Official Plan Review process and represents the standard that the Province is moving towards.

LEAR consists of two parts; the Land Evaluation (LE) portion and the Area Review (AR) portion. The LE provides a method of determining the importance of an area's soil resources in terms of their use for agriculture. The AR provides a method for identifying important factors, other than soils, that contribute to the suitability of the study area for agricultural activities. Factors selected reflect social, economic and environmental elements of land use (e.g. fragmentation). Each factor selected is divided into a range of possible scores in accordance with local knowledge and provincial policies.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs has completed relatively recent LEAR mapping for York Region which the Region has obtained. As part of the Greenbelt conformity work plan, Regional staff is proposing the Provincial work be reviewed by consultants for the Region and combined with local knowledge, through consultation to refine the Agricultural and Rural designations in the Regional Official Plan.

This refinement is an important step in that the conformity process. The refined areas can be used by local municipalities in undertaking their own conformity exercises, prevents non- agricultural land uses from establishing in those areas and identifies where future settlement area expansions may and may not take place in terms of the Greenbelt provisions.