

# Agricultural Impact Assessments (AIAs): A Primer

Food Safety and Environmental Policy Branch  
Agricultural Land use Planning Unit

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness

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# Outline

- OMAFA's role in Land Use Planning
- Farmland Trends
- Policy Context:
  - PPS, 2024
  - Provincial Land Use Plans
  - Aggregate Resources Act
- Overview of AIAs
  - Hierarchy of Measures
  - AIA and the Agricultural System
- Overview of AIA Process:
  - AIA or equivalent analysis
  - Implementation considerations
  - Evaluation of alternative locations
  - IESO's Second Long-term Procurement (LT2)
  - OMAFA Resources

# OMAFRA Role in Land Use Planning

- Support the long-term protection of agricultural land and viability of the agricultural system.
- Technical expertise in policy development for farmland protection and agricultural land use
  - Support development of provincial policies (e.g., PPS) and plans (e.g., Greenbelt)
- Support implementation through One Window review and approval of municipal planning documents by MMAH; and Municipal Plan Review where appropriate.
- Work with partner ministries to balance various provincial resource interests with agricultural land protection.
- Develop training and guidance material to support agricultural land use planning in Ontario.
- Provide agricultural mapping and other data for MMAH and municipalities
  - Agricultural System Portal (data and mapping)
  - Agricultural Capability mapping (e.g. Canada Land Inventory for Common Field Crops)
  - Mapping of municipal drains and tile drainage systems
- Coordinate with other agricultural legislation as needed, such as: *Nutrient Management Act, 2002; Farming and Food Production Protection Act, 1998; and Drainage Act.*

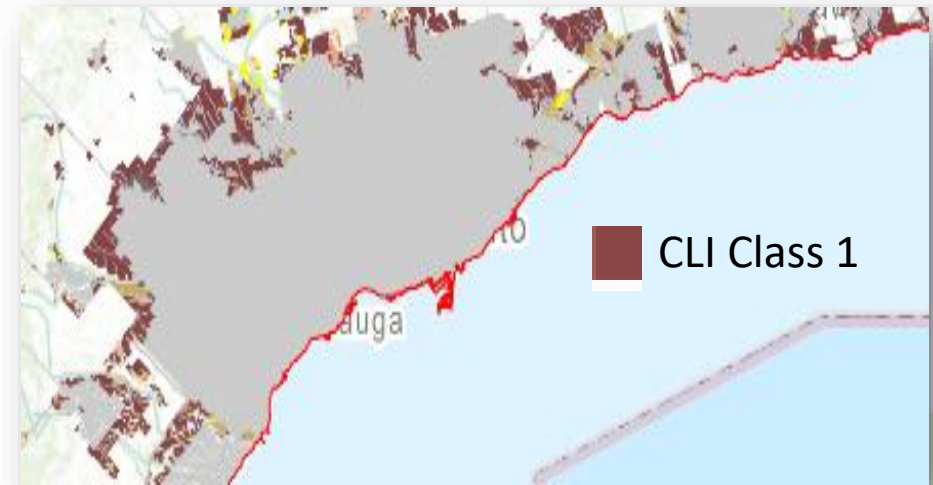


# Farmland Trends

- Several data sources to track trends over time; each source tells us something different (e.g., leading and lagging indicators, quantity vs. quality, location):
  - CLI soils mapping
  - Census of Agriculture
  - Official Plans
  - GIS data (e.g., SOLRIS, AAFC)
  - MPAC
- Key findings:
  - All data sources show a decline in farmland area
  - Development pressure continues to be highest on Ontario's best agricultural land
  - Lower capability land is being farmed to compensate for the loss in high quality land; limited opportunities to convert additional land to crops
  - Some opportunities for vertically integrated agriculture (e.g., greenhouses), but higher cost and resource needs, and only an option for limited commodities.

## Availability Analysis

CLI Class	Millions of Ha	% of ON's land base
Class 1	1.2	1.4%
Class 2	1.6	1.8%
Class 3	1.2	1.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>4.4%</b>



Expansion of urban areas in the GTA occur on high quality farmland

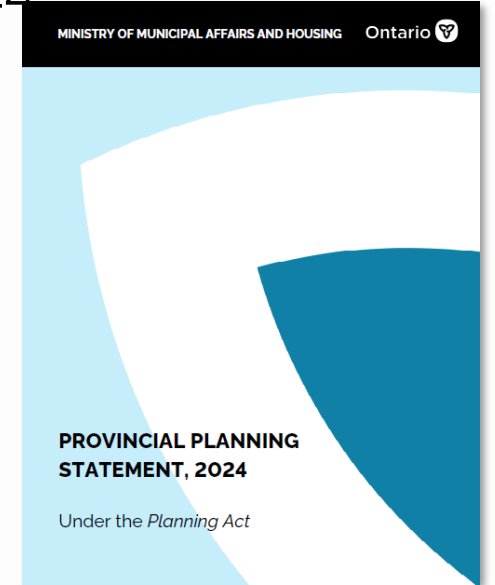


# Policy Context

- The Provincial Planning Statement came into effect October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024
- A key change is requiring AIAs Province-wide for non-agricultural uses (whereas previously, AIAs were only required in the Greater Golden Horseshoe Region).
- The PPS 2024 requires an AIA for:
  - New/expanding mineral aggregate operations in Prime Agricultural Areas
  - Other non-agricultural uses (e.g., hospitals, golf courses) in Prime Agricultural Areas

AIAs are required to be considered for:

- Settlement area boundary expansions





# What is an AIA?

- A study that identifies and evaluates potential impacts of non-agricultural development on the agricultural system.
- Recommends ways to **avoid**, or where avoidance is not possible, **minimize** and **mitigate** adverse impacts.
- A tool to inform where and how development can occur in a way that supports the success of the agri-food sector.
  - For example, by including measures to retain agricultural land and promote compatibility with agricultural operations and agribusinesses.
- The AIA process is flexible and can be scoped to be proportional to the size and potential impact of the project.
  - Costs for AIA can range, depending on scale and work involved, such as detailed soil sampling.
- AIAs are often completed by a consultant who has knowledge of Ontario agriculture.
- The Province is not an AIA approver but may provide support by sharing data/mapping and providing advice on process/content.



AIAs help build support for proposed development and compatibility with agricultural operations and businesses



# AIA Hierarchy of Measures

## 1. **Avoid:** Impacts are prevented

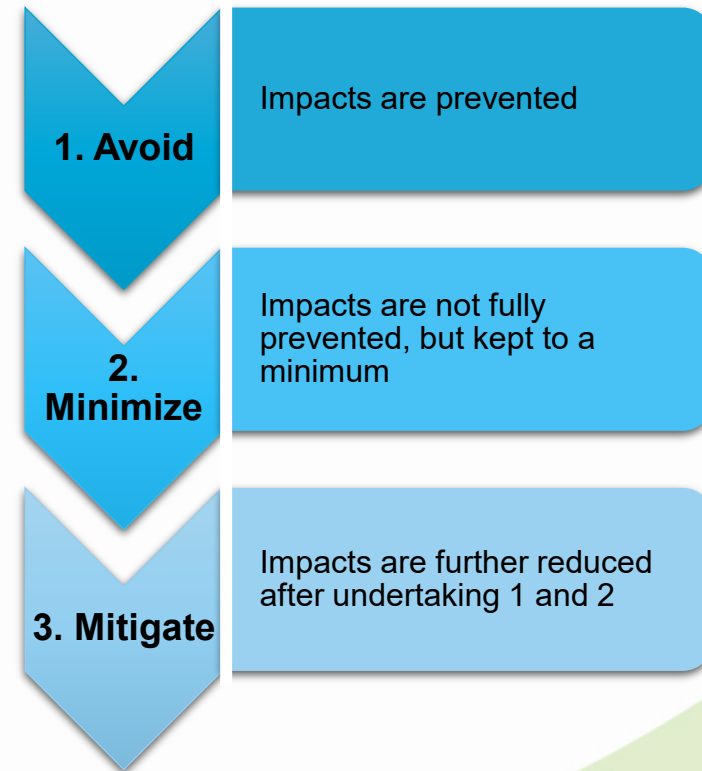
- Consider alternative locations; with preference to sites outside of prime agricultural areas (PAA) (i.e., rural lands) or those that avoid key elements of the agri-food network.

## 2. **Minimize:** Impacts are not fully prevented, but kept to a minimum

- If a development is permitted in a PAA and it has been demonstrated that it must locate in a PAA (e.g., due to other siting constraints, etc.), then lower priority agricultural lands must also be considered.
- For example, Class 3 land prior to Class 1 or 2 lands.

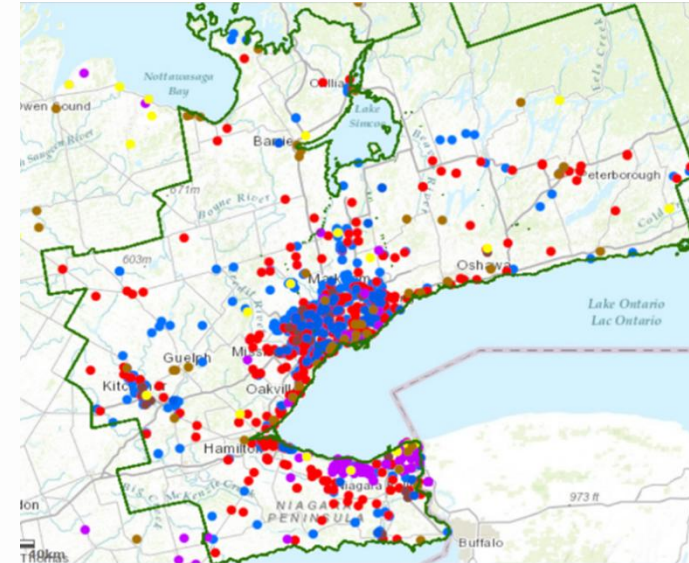
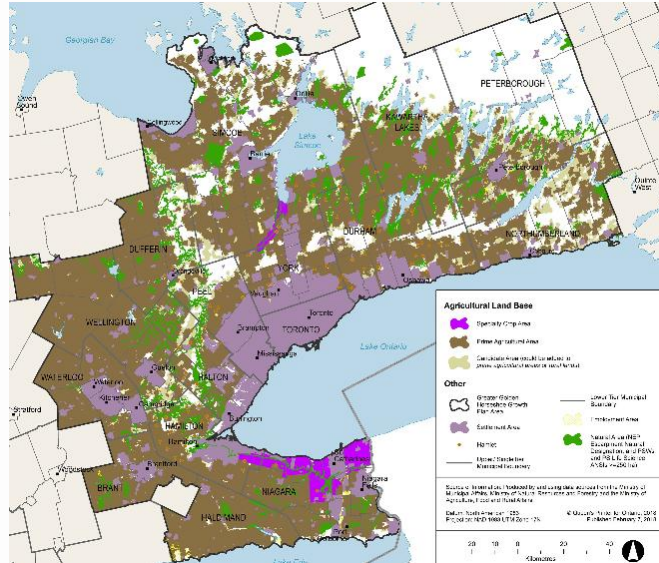
## 3. **Mitigate:** There will be impacts, but they are managed through different techniques/tools, for example:

- vegetative screens and buffers;
- setbacks and location on site;
- fencing;
- alternative access to farm fields;
- planned rehabilitation;
- managing on-site construction (e.g., phasing, timing, etc.) to lessen impacts to surrounding agricultural operations, etc.



# Agricultural System Approach

- An **Agricultural System** is a group of inter-connected elements that together create a viable, thriving agricultural sector.



## 1. Agricultural Land Base

Continuous, productive land base composed of prime agricultural areas (including Specialty Crop Areas) and **may** include other lower capability lands supporting agricultural production



## 2. Agri-Food Network

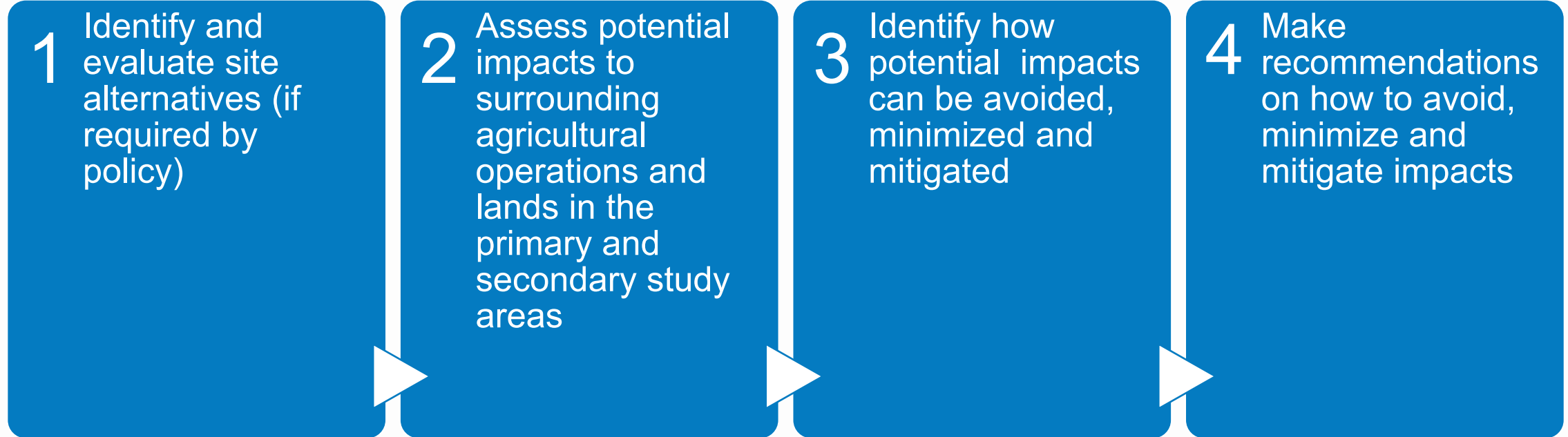
Infrastructure, services, and agri-food assets (processors, feed mills, etc.) important to the viability of the agri-food sector

[Agricultural Systems Portal \(arcgis.com\)](https://arcgis.com)





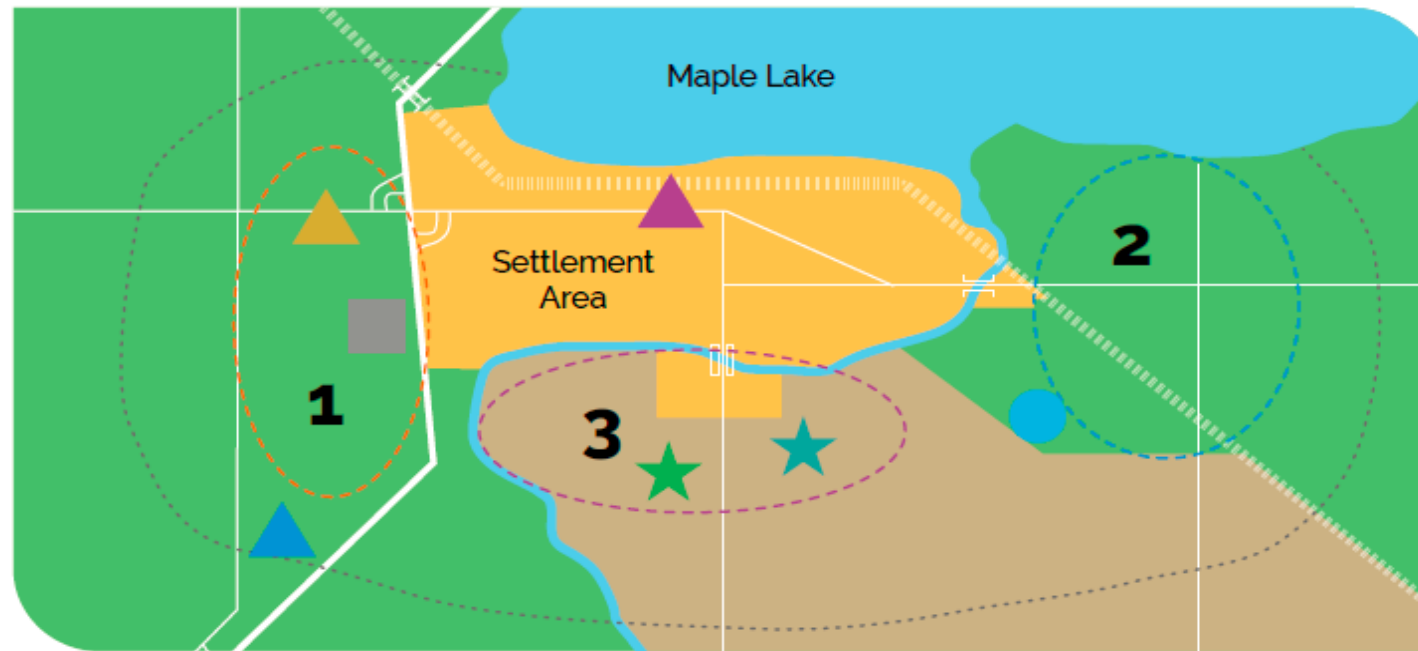
# Agricultural Impact Assessment Process



Agricultural Impact Assessment Report
Section 1: Introduction
Section 2: Study Areas
Section 3: Assessment of Impacts
Section 4: Measures to Address Impacts
Section 5: Recommendations and Conclusions
Appendices



# Evaluation of Alternative Locations



- 1. primary study area
- 2. primary study area
- 3. primary study area
- secondary study area

- prime agricultural areas
- rural lands
- existing settlement area

## Elements of the agri-food network:

- farm implement dealership
- cold storage and distribution facility
- food processor
- food processor (in settlement area)
- abattoir
- grain dryer
- veterinary clinic



# AIA or Equivalent Analysis

- Impacts to the agricultural system may be documented in an AIA report or as part of another study as an “equivalent analysis”
  - Planning Justification Report that addresses several land use planning matters
  - Reference may be made to other studies rather than duplicate work (e.g., noise, traffic, hydrogeology studies)
  - E.g., Environmental Assessment (EA) for infrastructure projects such as transportation systems, water and wastewater treatment plants, landfill sites
  - E.g., Environmental Report to satisfy Ontario Energy Board’s Environmental Guidelines for the Location, Construction and Operation of Hydrocarbon Pipelines and Facilities in Ontario
- Agricultural System impacts may be one of several considerations / priorities (e.g., growth management / complete communities, need for aggregate resources or infrastructure) but the aim is to find opportunities to avoid, minimize and mitigate impacts



# Study Areas

**Primary Study Area:** area considered for the proposed non-agricultural use

**Secondary Study Area:** area that may be impacted by the proposed use; area may vary depending upon the degree/type of impact

- The size of the study areas will vary depending on the proposed use and the potential for adverse impacts.
- Pre-consultation with an approval authority, supported by a broad-scale scan of agricultural land uses and the agri-food network in the area can help inform the identification of study areas.
- Context matters, consider the type and scale of the proposed use, consider the types of agricultural operations, the agri-food network and potential impacts.



**Settlement  
Area  
Boundary  
Expansions**



**Mineral  
Aggregate  
Extraction**



# Who can undertake an AIA?

- AIAs are often completed by a consultant who has knowledge of Ontario agriculture.
- 'Qualified Professionals' include consultants involved in the disciplines of development, engineering, land use planning, environmental assessments, agrology and agronomy.
- Key areas of expertise and knowledge include:
  - Ontario agri-business, agricultural supply chains, rural/agricultural economic development;
  - rural and agricultural land use planning;
  - Canada Land Inventory (CLI) classification system for assessing agricultural land, and where necessary, soil science and soil mapping procedures;
  - Minimum Distance Separation formulae and biosecurity practices and protocols;
  - reviewing technical information from non-agricultural disciplines (e.g., hydrology, hydrogeology, geotechnical and transportation reports) and assessing their relevance and utility in identifying potential agricultural impacts;
  - identifying, assessing, and evaluating the potential measures to avoid, minimize and mitigate impacts to the *agricultural system*; and
  - providing expert testimony in Ontario.



**A team approach is recommended for complex proposals**



# AIA Guidance Updates



# AIA Guidance Updates

OMAFA is in the process of updating the 2018 Draft AIA Guidance.

Updates and improvements to the document will include:

- Removing outdated references and updating to reflect the PPS (2024) requirement for AIAs province-wide.
- Efforts to work towards more 'evergreen' guidance document (e.g., removing specific policy references to reduce updates needed in future)
- Efforts/edits to emphasize a flexible approach for the completion of AIAs; effort is to be proportional to project size and potential impacts.
- Provide a more robust suite of measures for avoiding, minimizing, and mitigating impacts to agriculture to increase compatibility with non-agricultural uses.
- Edits to streamline and make the document more user-friendly (e.g., colour-coded based on types of development, an AIA checklist, a case study, and list of resources to support completion of AIAs).



# Agricultural considerations in LT2

- November 28, 2024 Ministerial Directive to the IESO outlined that LT2 design must:
  - provide rated criteria points for projects that avoid prime agricultural areas;
  - ensure no new energy projects may be built in specialty crop areas;
  - prohibit ground-mounted solar projects in prime agricultural areas; and,
  - require the completion of an Agricultural Impact Assessment (AIA) to the satisfaction of the municipality, if a project were proposed to locate in a prime agricultural area.
- To support the procurement, OMAFA has developed guidance material for the AIA requirements.
  - AIA Component One Requirement (posted May 2025)
  - AIA Components Two and Three Requirement (available on IESO website)





# AIA Component One Requirement (i.e., avoiding impacts by evaluating alternative locations)

- As part of engaging with municipalities, proponents are expected to offer evidence of how alternative locations were evaluated as part of their site selection process, including:
  - siting options that avoid prime agricultural areas; or where avoidance was not possible,
  - siting options that minimize impacts, such as alternative locations in prime agricultural areas with lower priority agricultural lands, based on Canada Land Inventory (CLI) soil mapping.

Timing: Information shared with municipalities as part of seeking their support.

Milestone: Confirmation and attestation required at time of bid submission.

- Information documents evaluation of alternative locations and, if no reasonable alternatives were found, provide rationale explaining why.
- Guidelines recognize that project siting can be driven by many factors: sites with good fuel availability, transmission availability, cost to develop, etc.
- Guidelines available at IESO's [LT2 website](#).



# AIA Component Two & Three Requirements

- Impact assessment and approaches to **minimize and mitigate impacts**
  - Must be completed within 18 months of Contract award
  - Both stages require confirmation from the Local Municipality that the requirement has been met (within 18-months of contract execution), and both are formally documented through required LT2 prescribed forms.
  - OMAFA staff do not approve or endorse individual AIAs. Ministry staff may provide technical support to municipalities and Proponents/Suppliers to facilitate a consistent approach for AIAs.
  - Draft Guidelines for Component 2 and 3 are available at IESO's [LT2 website](#)



# Appendix A: AIA: Additional Resources

This list of sources of information may not be complete or applicable to all proposals. Contact OMAFA staff for additional information or resources, if needed.

- [Ag Maps](#) (interactive “make a map” application with layers on drainage, soil, CLI, etc.) (OMAFA)
- [Agricultural System Portal](#) (OMAFA)
- [Annual crop inventory mapping](#) (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada)
- [Ontario GeoHub](#) – topography/elevation, orthoimagery, soil, tile and constructed drainage, controlled drainage, seed zones, natural heritage features (Government of Ontario)
- [Ontario Soil Survey reports](#) (Government of Canada)
- Specialty crop area mapping and information – [Greenbelt Plan](#), [Grey County Official Plan](#), [County of Lambton Official Plan](#)
- [Topographic mapping](#) with effective user scale of 1:10,000 or larger where needed (MNR)



# Appendix B: Existing OMAFA Resources & Guidance Material

- The Minimum Distance Separation Formulae
- Prime Agricultural Areas
- The Agricultural System
- Agricultural Systems Portal
- Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario's Prime Agricultural Areas
- Draft Agricultural Impact Assessment Guidance
- GIS Storyboard on evaluating alternative locations for non-agricultural uses

