

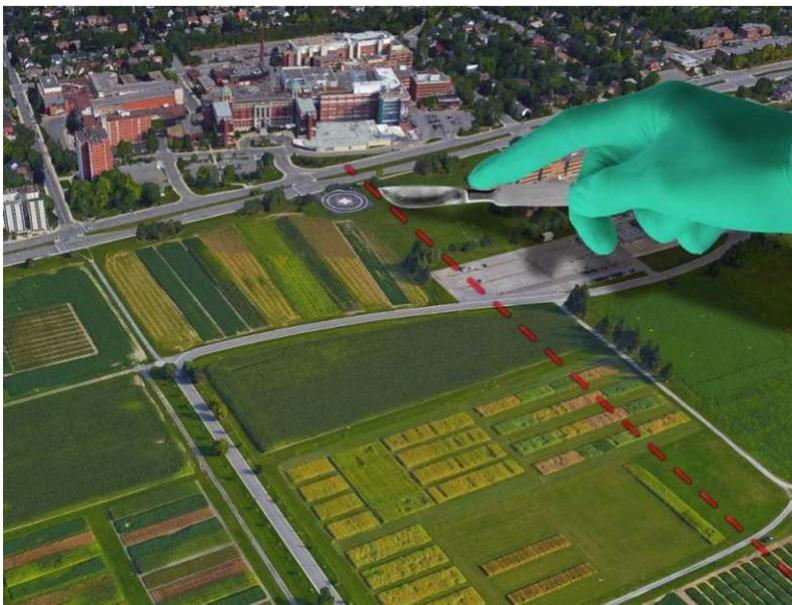
Experimental Farm advocates hope Liberals reverse plan to give land to new Civic hospital



ELIZABETH PAYNE, OTTAWA CITIZEN

[More from Elizabeth Payne, Ottawa Citizen](#)

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Amputating 60 acres of the Experimental Farm would wipe out a decades-long soil research project and reduce overall research land by 15 per cent, but would give space to The Ottawa Hospital to replace its aging Civic campus, top, with a state-of-the-art facility. ROBERT CROSS / OTTAWA CITIZEN

A year ago, a plan brokered behind closed doors for 60 acres of prime scientific research land to be given to The Ottawa Hospital to rebuild its Civic campus came as a shock even to those who

work on the Experimental Farm. Now, writes **Elizabeth Payne**, opponents of the plan hope a new Liberal government that says it's committed to transparency and science will revisit the decision.

The Central Experimental Farm is such a beloved institution in Ottawa that volunteers contribute 10,000 hours every year helping to keep its public areas clean and beautiful. Friends of the Farm describes itself as a “charitable organization of committed volunteers and supportive members who care about the Farm in Ottawa.”

Where were these committed volunteers when they learned last year that a 60-acre chunk of the national historic site, founded in 1886 by Sir John A. Macdonald, would be severed to make way for a new hospital? They were blindsided by the announcement and later, according to some members, they were muzzled from expressing concern — even threatened by the federal government with disbandment and an end of cooperation if the group openly criticized the plan.

Slapping down volunteer gardeners might seem like a heavy-handed way for a federal government to help find space for a new hospital, but it helps to explain why public reaction to the plan has been somewhat muted, especially compared with the vocal outrage over plans to put a memorial to victims of communism near the Supreme Court of Canada.

The issue is complicated, though. The Civic campus of The Ottawa Hospital, which opened its doors on Carling Avenue in 1924, needs to be replaced. Regular expansions have resulted in what has been called a Frankenstein complex — ungainly and renovated beyond its practical limits — which is why The Ottawa Hospital has been planning for a new super-hospital for years.

While scientists from around the world have expressed shock that a key research field could be dug up to make way for a hospital, to many Ottawa residents who strongly support a new hospital, it just looks like another farmer's field.

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Still, volunteers, heritage activists, scientists and others are hoping the election last month of a new federal Liberal government that vows to be more transparent and to bring a new level of respect for scientists means the issue will be revisited.

“I am really hoping the government will review this,” said Grace Strachan, a former urban planner with the National Capital Commission who sat on the Central Experimental Farm advisory council. “I am very concerned about the decision to remove such a large piece of the farm, which is also a national historic site.”

“They need to reverse this,” added Kate Harrigan, who is active in the Civic Hospital community association and is involved with Friends of the Farm. “This is a big problem.”

River Ward Councillor Riley Brockington, whose ward borders the proposed site, has tried for months to hold a public meeting with hospital officials to explain to community members how the site was selected and what comes next. He is still waiting.

He is meeting with new Environment Minister Catherine McKenna, though, whose riding includes the farm. On Thursday McKenna said she had been “hearing from residents” with concerns about it, but wasn’t aware of any plan to review the decision. The issue is the responsibility of Mélanie Joly, the new Liberal minister of Canadian Heritage who was unavailable for an interview on the subject.

Blindsided



Nov. 3, 2014: Former MP John Baird, centre, shocks the city by announcing his government will lease 60 acres of the Experimental Farm to The Ottawa Hospital. Dr. Mark Kristmanson, CEO of the NCC, left, and Dr. Jack Kitts, CEO of The Ottawa Hospital, look on. JEAN LEVAC / OTTAWA CITIZEN/POSTMEDIA NEWS

The announcement — on Nov. 3, 2014 by former Conservative MP John Baird and Ottawa Hospital President and CEO Jack Kitts that the hospital would get 60 acres of the farm on which to build a new Civic campus — took almost everyone by surprise. The press conference was the result of negotiations involving The Ottawa Hospital, Agriculture Canada and the National Capital Commission, done behind closed doors and with no public consultation.

Friends of the Farm was not the only organization blindsided by the announcement. Members of the Central Experimental Farm Advisory Council — an appointed group whose mandate is to “provide advice and recommendations to Agriculture and Agri-

Food Canada on the future of the Farm” — learned about the plan in the newspaper. The council was set up in 1998 when the Central Experimental Farm was declared a national historic site. At the same time, Agriculture Canada declared the farm lands would “remain in public ownership.” Transferring land for use of a hospital arguably follows that rule, but it might not be in keeping with the sentiment.

Even scientists whose lifetime’s work would be destroyed to make way for the hospital only found out about the plan when it was announced. Farm researchers were sent a letter from Agriculture Canada officials the same day, assuring them that the farm was not “for sale” and emphasizing that the land was being leased and not sold. (The plan calls for the land to be severed from the farm and transferred to the NCC, which would lease it to the hospital for a nominal amount, final details of which have yet to be completed.)

According to emails obtained by the Citizen, Edward Gregorich, a scientist whose experiments would be lost under the plan, emailed the Eastern Cereal and Oilseed Research Centre on the day after Baird and Kitts made the announcement. Gregorich, whose work contributed to the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for climate change, wondered whether there had been any consultation about the plan, saying his long-time work in historic Field No.1, where the hospital is to relocate, was core to his research and “irreplaceable.” He wrote that abandoning the crop rotation and tillage research on the site would mean the loss of 24 years of accumulated ecological knowledge and delay by several decades the findings “so urgently needed by farmers.”

“I know,” replied Marc Savard, associate director of the centre. “They didn’t care. Well, AAFC (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada) cared. No one else.”

Harvey Voldeng, a career researcher at the farm who, although retired, continues to work on research, said the announcement came out of nowhere. “We (employees) were completely taken by surprise by that. Usually in an organization there are not too many secrets, at least not that they can keep. It hit everybody as a big surprise.”

Ron Bonnett, president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, complained of the “lack of transparency around the fact that there was a sale or assignment of land for the hospital without really talking to some of the people who were involved in the agricultural side before the decision was made.”



Researcher Harvey Voldeng stands on the land in Experimental Farm that has been given to Ottawa Hospital to replace the existing Civic campus, seen behind him. JEAN LEVAC / OTTAWA CITIZEN

A new hospital site

While the plan surprised many, plans to build a new Civic campus is not new. In 2008, the hospital floated the idea of putting a new building at Hunt Club and Woodroffe in the city's southwest. At the time, officials noted that a new hospital would handle the most serious trauma patients and sophisticated surgeries and be a tertiary centre for the region, not a neighbourhood hospital.

In 2012, Kitts and others from the hospital started talking about the Experimental Farm across from the Civic as another possible site. That got a quick negative response from Agriculture Canada and others. Richard Hinchcliff, director of communications with Friends of the Farm at the time, said the idea was "like putting an apartment building on Parliament Hill."

Meanwhile, the National Trust for Canada, a national charity dedicated to saving historic places, has placed the Central Experimental Farm on its list of Canada's most endangered places, and opposition to the move is growing, including among scientists from around the world.

The Ottawa Hospital says it considered 12 sites before settling on the Experimental Farm land across from the current Civic campus, two of which were also on the farm: Baseline and Fisher and the site of the since-demolished Sir John Carling Building off Carling Avenue.

Other sites considered included Hurdman Station, Woodroffe and Baseline beside Algonquin College, across from the Nepean Sportsplex on Woodroffe, the former Nortel campus at Carling and Moodie, Confederation Heights at Riverside and Heron, Tunney's Pasture, Booth Street and the Hunt Club South Corridor. Rebuilding on the

current site, a hospital spokesperson said, would be prohibitively costly and add years to the construction time.

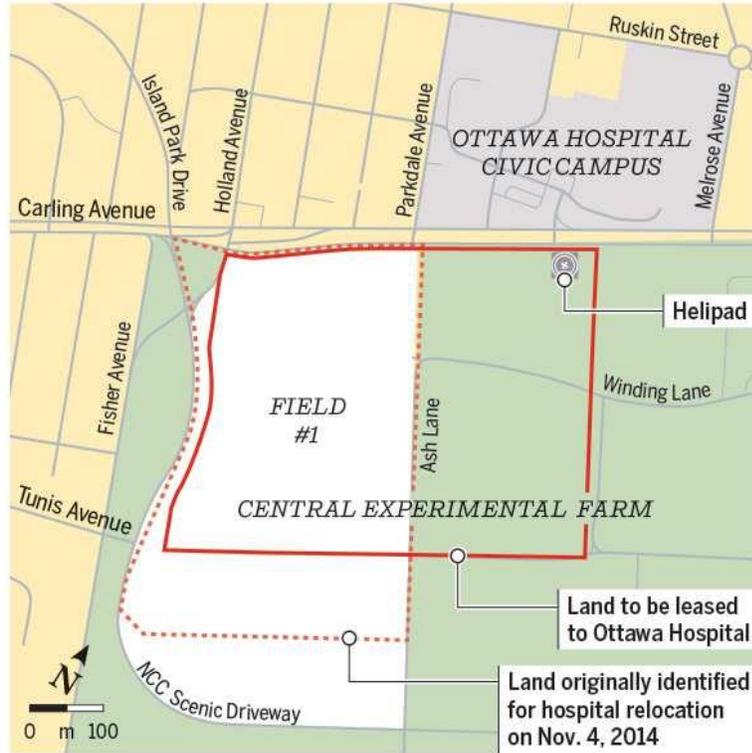
Selection was based on a dozen criteria, including that the site be either central “or towards the west or south west of the city,” that it allow for multiple road access points for emergency vehicles, the public and deliveries, that it be close to major transportation and transit routes, that it allow “flexibility for future expansion over and above what is currently planned,” that there be minimal impact on nearby communities and that the land does not require significant preparation. It also considered the impact on agriculture and “Canada’s research mandate,” the ease of getting hydro, sewer and gas to the site and the impact of the transition from the current site to the new site.

By many of those measures, moving the hospital across the street to an undeveloped lot is the easiest option.

But Harrigan, who lives near the hospital and is involved with Friends of the Farm, said there are more things to consider than convenience. “Obviously it is a no brainer for them to want to be as close to what they currently have as possible, but this should not be about a minister parachuting in and saying: ‘Here is some land.’ Where is the transparency?”

PROPOSED SITE OF NEW HOSPITAL

In 2014, former Ottawa MP John Baird announced that the federal government would lease 60 acres of the Experimental Farm to The Ottawa Hospital to rebuild its Civic campus. The boundaries of that parcel have since been updated:



OTHER SITES CONSIDERED



- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Baseline Ave. and Fisher Ave. | 7. Former Nortel site on Carling Rd. at Moodie Dr. |
| 2. Across from the Nepean Sportsplex | 8. Confederation Heights |
| 3. Site of the since-demolished Sir John Carling Building | 9. Tunney's Pasture |
| 4. Current proposed location | 10. Booth Street |
| 5. Hurdman Station | 11. Hunt Club South Corridor |
| 6. Woodroffe Ave. and Baseline Rd. | 12. Bayview Yards |

International treasure

Pete Smith, a professor of soils and global change at Aberdeen University in Scotland, wrote to former federal Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz in February asking the government to reconsider.

“This would be an incredibly unfortunate time to lose such an international treasure. History would judge this a very short-sighted decision.”

An official with Agriculture Canada said the 60 acres in question makes up 5.7 per cent of the farm’s 1,052 acres and “there is sufficient land on the CEF to accommodate the research program.” Researchers, however, say the land amounts to 15 per cent or more of actual research lands.

The final boundaries for the new hospital, which stretch along Carling Avenue roughly mirroring the hospital across the street, would force the end of research on two fields in addition to the rebuilding and rerouting of a number of farm roads. When the plan was announced, hospital officials released a map that showed the new hospital would be on land that now contains historic Field No. 1, but would not go beyond that field. But the final boundaries show the new hospital would take over two research fields and require farm roads to be moved, something an Agriculture Canada official suggested — in emails obtained by the Citizen — was not what the minister had in mind.

The new boundaries, obtained by the Citizen, show the land to be severed for the hospital is bordered by the Scenic Driveway in the west, Carling in the north and as far as the current helipad in the east, almost to the Agriculture Canada buildings on Carling Avenue. The land transfer will require the permanent rerouting of portions of Ash Lane and Winding Lane and would require some plots east of Ash Lane where work on improve yields and resistance of corn, wheat, oats, barley, soybeans and canola is currently being done, to move to another part of the farm.

NCC CEO Mark Kristmanson noted that the move would mean “the loss of a portion of this very important heritage cultural landscape and heritage site.” But he added that the “social benefit, broadly speaking, is hard to argue against.”

The alternatives, Kristmanson said, “are not fantastic. When you think of the densification coming in this city, when you think of the growing health care needs of this city, and you think of the actual condition of the Civic Hospital and the fact that it is strained in its life cycle, it’s hard to imagine that it would be preferable to locate this hospital much further out.”

Harrigan said she is hopeful that cabinet ministers in the Trudeau government — which has made both science and climate change priorities — will understand how critical the land in question is. Research on Field No. 1 gave the International Panel on Climate Change information about the storage of carbon in soil. “It is critical land. It is not to be paved over for a parking lot.”

National Historic Site Under Pressure

When the farm was designated a national historic site in 1998, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada called it a “distinct cultural landscape” and noted that it had made significant scientific contributions to agriculture in Canada, including the development of hardy strains of wheat “that were so influential in expanding western Canadian agriculture.”

It also noted that the 400-hectare farm in the heart of the nation’s capital “reflects the 19th century philosophy of agriculture and carefully integrates an administrative core and a range of other buildings with arboretum, ornamental gardens, display beds and experimental fields in a picturesque composition.”

However, commemoration as a national historic site is an honorific and does not provide protection, says Leslie Maitland, past-president of Heritage Ottawa, which opposes the land transfer.

“The federal government can provide protection for the national historic sites that it owns and manages, but only if it wants to,” she said. “In the case of the Farm, Minister John Baird, then responsible for Foreign Affairs and the National Capital Commission, simply announced the severance for the use of a new hospital.

“There was no account taken of the significance of the farm as a national historic site or as an internationally significant agricultural research station, whose long-term researches on these specific acreages have contributed to our food security and the success of the agricultural sector of our economy.”

Maitland said she would like to see a better public justification for why the northwest corner of the farm was chosen over other sites. And, crucially, she argues that the Historic Sites and Monuments Act needs some teeth to better protect such sites, a sentiment echoed by Harrigan.

Hospital of the future

The new hospital is intended to be smaller and more efficient than current hospitals. Even with population growth, it will likely not have any more beds than the existing hospital.

According to hospital’s chief of staff, Dr. Jeff Turnbull, it will work as a hub with spokes throughout the community. Many of the services currently provided at the hospital will be available in the community or in patients’ homes. Even some surgeries will likely be moved out of the Civic to existing community hospitals or, possibly, new facilities where they will be less costly than at the region’s trauma and high-level care centre. Its focus will be on the most advanced forms of health care, including cardiac surgery, transplants, spinal surgery and neurosurgery, according to Turnbull and CEO Jack Kitts.

This vision of the Civic — redrawn as a centre for only the sickest patients and the most high-tech and highly skilled surgeries — argues against the need for a new hospital to be centrally located. It will no longer be the neighbourhood hospital it was when first opened in 1924.

What's next

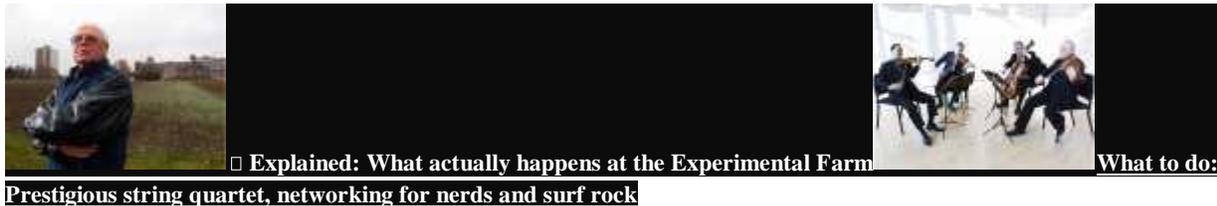
The Ottawa Hospital says it is “working with our partners to create a consultation schedule” — something expected soon. When that happens, the consultations will focus on design and landscaping, rather than the location of the new hospital.

“Elements of landscaping are going to be critical,” said Nicholas Galletti, director of strategic media at the National Capital Commission. “So that it doesn’t have an overarching impact on the rest of the farm, so the farm can still operate and the hospital can be integrated into the area.”

While River Councillor Brockington continues to wait for a public meeting to have officials answer questions, a number have actually been cancelled by the hospital. According to documents, Agriculture Canada and the NCC recommended early public consultations to foster goodwill, but Ottawa Hospital officials pushed back, saying consultations shouldn’t happen until the land transfer is complete.

Meanwhile, volunteers, advocates, scientists and others are watching the early days of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government to see if reviewing plans to sever 60 acres of the Central Experimental Farm is on its to-do list.

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Explained: What actually happens at the Experimental Farm



TOM SPEARS, OTTAWA CITIZEN

[More from Tom Spears, Ottawa Citizen](#)

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We see the neat rows of corn, wheat and oats growing in the Central Experimental Farm as we drive along Baseline Road,

but few of us know what's really going on there. Tom Spears reveals the science behind the “scenery.”

How is the farm “experimental”?

The Farm’s scientific identity hides in plain sight, disguised in technical language (“The genome of the generalist plant pathogen *Fusarium avenaceum* is enriched with genes involved in redox, signaling and secondary metabolism,” says one study’s title.)

None of the Farm’s many investigations instantly solve an agriculture problem, but they form the building blocks of progress, such as the study that found how altering one corn gene made the plants resistant to fusarium, a fungus that spreads toxins to grain.

There are experiments trying to make crops more drought-resistant, improve soil, understand more about worms and insects that chew up whole fields.

Who needs an old farm when there are fancy new labs?

“Agriculture happens outside,” says Rene Van Acker, the associate dean of the Ontario Agricultural College. And he says it’s essential to do the research outdoors, too, testing the interplay of genes and the environment.

“Having an outdoor research site is fundamental to doing that,” with different sites for different climatic regions with their unique rainfall, soil types and frost-free days.

Van Acker says carving off a piece of the Farm “would be like tearing down a laboratory. People generally probably don’t view it that way. They think, oh, it’s just farmland. But it’s farmland that is being managed as a research laboratory,” with the added benefit of having all the labs and brainpower right on the property. “It’s an important site.”

What’s happening on the field where the hospital would go?

On Field One, slated for hospital development, there’s an experiment that began in 1990, after soil physicist Clarke Topp and his colleagues realized farmers were having trouble with the soil itself.

Tilling — think of a roto-tiller tearing up a lawn, but on a much larger scale — is traditionally done to break up soil before planting, and then during the growing season to chop down weeds. By the late 1980s, researchers realized that Canada’s farms were compacting and damaging their soil by over-cultivating it.

“Cultivation and heavy tractors broke down a lot of the soil structures. So there was less ability to get water in and to get oxygen in for the roots,” Topp says. And the repeated chewing-up of the soil was depleting it of vital carbon.

The question became whether less tilling would repair the soil.

“I was part starting those zero-tillage and minimal-tillage plots in 1990. And they are continuing to the present day,” explains Topp. “What my colleagues now do is, they have a series of plots that are conventional tillage, with as many as five passes of the instrument and tractors over the field during the growing season. And then we have zero-till, and that is where you plant right into last year’s crop residue.

“Now we’re looking at the rebuilding of the soil structure.”

Twenty-five years of this study are showing progress. Carbon is now being recycled from dead plants on the surface into a more stable form of soil. A side benefit: This prevents the carbon from turning into carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas.

So, experiment over? No, says Topp. “The rebuilding of soil ... is very slow.”

Soil sustainability means looking into the distant future, he says. Centuries, not years. “The soil has a good capacity to regenerate, fortunately, but it takes a long time... We are looking for cultural practices that are sustainable on a long, long time scale.”

What else happens on the Farm?

- The Experimental Farm is front and centre in the fight against disease. “It’s an arms race,” says Peter Anderson, a historian studying the Farm. Bugs, weeds and plant diseases are always evolving better ways to attack the foods we eat, and it’s up to lab scientists to stay ahead of them. This involves understand how the genes of both crops and their attackers work, and applying genetic tools — either conventional breeding or genetic manipulation.
- The department advertises that the Farm has produced “more than 25 superior cultivars of wheat, oats, barley and soybeans developed in the past five years.”
- Other farming issues include how to develop resistance to drought that is expected with a warming climate, or to make soybeans have more protein, increasing their value as animal feed.

Can't private industry do this work?

The Farm has one of Canada's few core groups of plant breeders who develop new varieties, Van Acker says. "Despite the fact that private industry is well engaged in plant breeding, they depend on public breeding in each region to really form a basis" for their work.

"If we didn't have any public breeding, we would have no leading-edge varieties."

Fine, but why not let giant seed companies do this work?

"Because at the stage where these are essentially ideas, and questions of 'I wonder if...' then seed companies won't take that on," Topp says. "Their primary interest is in profit-making for their shareholders and there's no basis for spending a lot of money on scientists who are just going to play around with ideas for a number of years. And then when the good stuff (experimental results) comes out, then they are quite happy to move in."

In the 1970s Harvey Voldeng's group bred soybeans that could stand up to Central Eastern Ontario weather, not just the warmth of the London-to-Windsor region. The breakthrough was a variety called Maple Arrow, in 1976, and more have followed since. Soybeans don't sound sexy, but Ontario farms produced nearly \$2 billion worth in 2014.

The Farm's research has contributed to making soybeans a major crop in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, which have short growing seasons.

What's the problem with having a hospital on the Farm?

Voldeng worries that the Farm will be chipped away a few acres at a time.

"Once you start to take a piece off it makes it that much easier to take another piece off. Then, when it's about half the size it is now — well, no point keeping this. It's too small. Once you start, where do you stop?"

He sees another future issue: "Let's face it, we do use herbicides on the Farm here. And if you start spraying herbicides in front of the Civic Hospital after it has expanded into the Farm, then there are going to be complaints."

Ron Bonnett, president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, says the Farm still represents good value.

“There’s still a lot of ongoing research on new varieties and crop trials, things that are very valuable to agriculture,” he says. This work is necessary to prepare for climate change and meet the world’s growing need for food. And with pests, “you think you have one problem solved and Mother Nature keeps throwing curves at you. Having that ongoing research is critical ... not only for the country but for the export market that we serve.”

“It’s a slippery slope and we should think long and hard about what we are giving up,” adds Van Acker at the Ontario Agricultural College. “Most people wouldn’t know about what we are giving up but it is a critical laboratory for the nation.”

Can the farm be moved to a rural area?

Technically yes, says Van Acker, but there are obstacles.

“There’s an advantage to juxtaposition and having the laboratory (test plots) right outside the door where the researchers are.” If it moved far into the Ottawa Valley the researchers would have to go for a long drive every time they wanted to check the progress in a corn field.

But he said this isn’t an impossible idea. The University of Guelph is some distance from many of its agricultural research plots, “so we are driving to most of our research land.”

As for moving the whole operation — laboratory buildings, greenhouses and all the staff — “the cost would be enormous,” he said. “You have a very well- and long-established base there. Anything’s possible, but...”