

New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal

Arguing against the forestry plan

Wed Apr 16 2014

Page: A9

Section: Opinion

Byline: Marc-André Villard. Tom Beckley and Diana Hamilton

Commentary

In the words of Yogi Berra, "...it ain't over 'til it's over." The day after New Brunswick's forest industry obtained a guarantee from David Alward's Government of a long-term wood supply, it announced massive investments in mills. The new Forestry Strategy proposes to reduce the proportion of public (or Crown) forest devoted to biodiversity objectives from 28 to 23 per cent of the land base. This percentage corresponds to riparian buffer strips and patches of old forest, including those protected as deer wintering habitat.

The Province's public forest is protected by law. Indeed, the government is responsible for the management of this forest on behalf of all New Brunswickers. The Crown Lands and Forests Act clearly states : "The Minister is responsible (...) for the development, utilization, protection and integrated management of the resources of Crown Lands, including (...) habitat for the maintenance of fish and wildlife populations."

Although priority has been given to creating new jobs, can this Government predict the consequences of this increased allocation of wood on our capacity to protect wildlife habitat? Have we heard from the experts in the Department of Natural Resources on this subject? Have the university-based researchers who are competent to address these questions been consulted? Have the people of New

Brunswick been heard from?

Pressed by a citizen on this subject, Premier Alward replied that the public had already been consulted. In fact, the public has been consulted several times over the past 10 years: following the 2002 Jaako Pöyry report, a special committee on wood supply conducted public hearings in 2003. A scientific public opinion survey on Crown land management was carried out in 2007. Two task forces, one on Crown and one on private Land forest management were formed in 2011. The opinions expressed were consistent: the people of New Brunswick attach great importance to the ecosystem services and environmental values of the forest. They do not want a major intensification of forest harvesting, especially through increasing reliance on conifer plantations.

The government's decision cannot be summarized as a choice among competing lobbies. Ecosystem functioning is an issue separate from the desires of humanity. Ecosystems have their own mechanisms and the factors required to maintain functional ecosystems and their associated ecological services (good water quality, habitat for fauna and flora, carbon fixation) have been shown to be highly sensitive to human activities such as resource extraction.

Throughout history, human societies have found themselves confronted by serious

problems when they neglected to respect ecological limits. Of course, there is some flexibility which enables us to harvest wood and to hunt and fish. However, just as it is necessary to monitor populations of fish and wildlife to avoid overexploiting them, we also need to measure the effects of forestry on water quality, the rate of carbon fixation by plants, and the populations of species associated with rare habitats. The resilience of the forest, including its ability to withstand the impacts of climate change, is directly dependent on the diversity and health of ecosystems, and this includes healthy old stands. A substantial number of widely recognized New Brunswick-based scientific studies provide direction on wise forest management, but the Government appears to have dismissed this science and citizen priorities and has instead responded to pressure by industry.

Skeptics of the new forestry strategy are placed in a difficult position. The impression may be that we are opposed to job creation (we are not), or in a reversal of roles (with government), that we should have the answers to how employment in the forest should be created.

Without being experts on the subject, we are however, capable of some basic reckoning. It has been estimated that 500 reportedly new permanent forestry jobs will be created through the new investments now being announced, which exceed 600 million dollars according to the industry. To this amount must be added the increased allocation of wood. Although it hasn't been costed in dollars, this wood amounts to a gift from the population of New Brunswick to the forest industry, despite a meagre return in royalties. The cost of each new permanent job is thus

more than a million dollars, so long as the timber market holds. Is this the best way to invest such amounts?

To be sure, it is not public money, but the investment was nonetheless conditional on the gift from New Brunswickers of 660,000 cubic metres of wood - this year and every year for some indefinite period. What is the real value of this wood for which the forest industry has been battling so long? Other employment and revenue options also seem to have been ignored, such as those associated with maple syrup production.

Under the pretext of creating employment and stimulating the economy, the government's Forestry Strategy would probably cross many ecological thresholds. These thresholds have been established on the basis of the best available scientific knowledge. A target has been established previously at 30 per cent of Crown land, to be maintained in buffer strips along watercourses, as well as in patches of old forest, including wintering habitat for deer. If we reduce the width of riparian buffer strips and the percentage of mature or old forest on Crown land, we threaten water quality, fish habitat, and the already fragmented habitats of numerous species of plants and animals.

And what will be the ecological and economic cost of building new logging roads to access remote stands the industry has been referring to? Of increased soil erosion? What about the cost of siltation of salmon spawning grounds and increased warming of rivers? What will be the effect on carbon sequestration, which can be greater in old forests than in younger stands? What will happen to the many species that are dependent on old forest habitats? Can we measure the cost of losing

rare species?

In his 2014 State of the Province address, Premier Alward declared: "We have struck the right balance between resource development and protecting our environment." But the Government likewise presented us with a "balanced approach" in its previous Forest Strategy of March 2012. How can it now present a radically different strategy that would result in a net loss of forest dedicated to conservation, and still speak of balance?

We are unaware of any scientific studies that support moving to this new "balance". We would argue that before committing our public natural resources in this way, the government has an obligation to demonstrate that its Forestry Strategy is ecologically sustainable. This is not a situation where we can afford to make a mistake; mature trees take minutes to cut down, but fifty years or more to reach commercial maturity. Once ecological thresholds are crossed, it has proven challenging to restore fully functioning ecosystems. Pharmaceutical companies must demonstrate safety and efficacy before a new drug is licensed; the burden of proof therefore is on the government to show us that this strategy is safe and will achieve its stated goals. We await this demonstration that the new Forestry Strategy is within safe limits for biodiversity and ecosystem functioning, based on credible evidence and rigorous scientific analysis. The tag line for the new Forestry Strategy is, "Putting our Resources to Work." We would humbly like to remind the Minister of Natural Resources and the Premier that our Crown land resources are hard at work right now, providing clean water, air and wildlife habitat. The scientific community and the

public have consistently told their leaders that this the most important work for our public forest to do.

Marc-André Villard is a biology professor at Université de Moncton. Tom Beckley is a forestry professor at the University of New Brunswick. Diana Hamilton is a biology professor at Mount Allison University. This commentary was also signed by other academics, whose names can be found at forestsforNB.org.

© 2014 Telegraph-Journal (New Brunswick)