

Dan Murphy, former director with the Department of Natural Resources, responds against the forest plan!

New strategy could leave our forests in a mess
Dan Murphy, Commentary
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Recently the New Brunswick government released its long-term forest strategy for the management of New Brunswick Crown lands.

This strategy is expected to lead to the harvesting of an additional 660,000 m³ of softwood (spruce and fir) annually from Crown land. This would bring the total annual harvest of softwood to about 3.9 million m³.

This is not the time to significantly increase softwood harvesting when our Crown forest is at the low point in the growing stock. As a result of steady harvesting pressure over the years, our remaining natural softwood forest consists of a large area of marginal or sub-marginal forest stands.

There have been instances in the past on some Crown licenses where wood from a future period had to be advanced to make up for the shortfall in the current period. This practice results in overharvesting and will happen to a greater extent under the new strategy as more wood has been committed from areas that are either inaccessible or very costly to harvest.

The new strategy indicates some of the increased softwood will be generated from increased commercial thinning of older plantations and pre-commercial thinnings. In order to generate the allowable cut, there will be a greater onus on the forest industry to do more commercial thinning.

There will be overharvesting of the Crown resource if wood is harvested from unplanned areas in the natural forest to make up for any shortfall from commercial thinning. Under the new strategy, the conservation forest will be reduced from 28 to 23 per cent. Scientists that have done research work in the conservation forest believe that the 23 per cent level is not sufficient to maintain adequate levels of mammals and birds that require the associated forest structure.

Since governments are responsible for managing the public's forests for a multitude of values, I recommend that the current government establish a budget for an independent agency to conduct a long-term study on the impact of reducing the conservation forest.

This budget would be maintained by successive governments until the longterm study was completed. This process should be started now to benchmark the populations of birds and mammals that require specific forest habitat and continued as the intensive harvesting progresses.

Governments cannot over-allocate our public resource without fully understanding the consequences.

From reading the strategy document, I believe government is planning on reducing its oversight of Crown operations. The statement that government will adopt a "results-based framework" with Crown licensees is very scary.

It seems to me that the Department of Natural Resources plans to reduce management costs and save taxpayers and the province several millions of dollars annually by reducing departmental field staff.

I must ask, who in the future will really manage our public forests; government or the forest products industry?

A "results-based" or outcome-based approach alone will not detect or report on the many infractions and poor performance caused by the forest industry in trying to achieve high level forest-wide objectives.

Such a change, if I correctly understand the intent, will leave many messes in our public forests. Do you want this? In closing, I am not against the forest industry having additional timber, but I am against it when it compromises both the sustainability of forest habitat and timber yield.

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