

Gallant government 'still making decisions' about forest plan changes

Premier says any changes to 2014 deal between industry and province will be revealed in coming weeks

Jacques Poitras

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Premier Brian Gallant says his government will reveal "in the next few weeks" whether it will make changes to the controversial forestry plan put in place by the previous Progressive Conservative government in 2014.

The plan gave forestry companies increased wood allocations that were supposed to spur the creation of hundreds of new jobs, in part because of mill expansions.

But environmentalists and private woodlot owners complained in 2014 that the plan, and resulting contracts signed with the largest companies, gave away too much.

Gallant told reporters those contracts make the review "a bit more complicated." The premier acknowledged two years ago the wood allocation provisions could not be changed.

'It's very complex'

"It's very complex as you can imagine, specifically, given the fact that the previous government had prepared their plan and signed some contracts," Gallant said Friday.

Premier Brian Gallant says New Brunswickers will find out in the next few weeks if his government will make changes in a forestry plan that brought criticism down on the previous Progressive Conservative government in 2014. (Sean Kilpatrick/Canadian Press)

"But we're going to be very diligent in making sure we can work within those confines and have the best plan possible for the New Brunswick economy."

The plan allowed companies to harvest 660,000 more cubic metres of softwood on Crown land, which is publicly owned. That was expected to create 500 more permanent jobs in the industry as well as 1,200 construction jobs during mill expansions.

That came at the expense of conservation areas and sustainable harvesting, critics said.

The Liberals promised in 2014 to evaluate "options under the current forestry plan and submit the sustainability provisions in the plan to a proper review."

In early 2015, then-natural resources minister Denis Landry said the government would change "maybe some things that aren't major, maybe some things that are major."

Still making decisions

Gallant wouldn't comment Friday on what's on the table.

"We're still in talks. We're still making decisions."

Mike Legere, executive director of Forest NB, doesn't think there is much room for changes to the forestry agreement between the industry and provincial government. (Twitter)

Mike Legere, the executive director of the forest industry group Forest NB, said the industry has been operating on the assumption the wood allocations will not change.

"It's business as usual with regards to commitments the province has made with allocations," he said. "Those commitments are pretty strong."

But he said it's possible companies could agree to other changes to accommodate what the Liberals want to achieve.

"I don't think there's a lot of room [for changes] but I'm sure we could get creative as an industry if there's something they want us to do."

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Legere said the pending announcement is probably linked to the upcoming signing of five-year plans by private companies who cut wood on the public land they lease from the province.

Those plans couldn't be finalized without any changes the government wanted to make to the overall plan, he said.

Legere said forestry companies have been more preoccupied with other issues lately, including an expected spruce budworm infestation and the lack of a Canada-U.S. softwood lumber agreement. The previous agreement, which expired last year, exempted lumber from the Maritime provinces from trade penalties.

Wood supply issues

Progressive Conservative MLA Ross Wetmore, the opposition critic for natural resources, said the Liberal changes should address criticisms made by Auditor-General Kim MacPherson in 2015.

MacPherson criticized the province's "failure to comply with its own legislation and provide leadership on private wood supply issues through a well-defined role and clear objectives."

Auditor General Kim MacPherson was critical of the province in 2015 for not complying with its own legislation about private wood supply issues. (CBC)

Private woodlots are supposed to be the primary source of wood supply for the forest industry, but woodlot owners say the forestry plan and other government policies make their wood less attractive than Crown wood.

"I think this government should be looking at the auditor general's report and acting on it," Wetmore said. "That's what they're supposed to do."

MacPherson also said the government wasn't overseeing silviculture programs on Crown land.

Wetmore brushed off a question about whether the PC forestry plan should have included stronger provisions on those two points, saying it's up to the Liberals to act on the auditor-general's findings.

"This is what she's saying," he said. "They're government. We're not in government."

Green Party Leader David Coon said the Liberals should do more to support private woodlots, including defending the wood marketing boards that have been in a legal battle with J.D. Irving Ltd.

But he agreed that the 2014 contracts with forest companies that incorporated the increased wood allocations mean it'll be hard for the Liberals to make substantial changes.

"So they haven't got any wiggle room whatsoever that I can see," Coon said. "But it'll be interesting to see what they come up with."