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Crown lands management needs more thought

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Letter to the Editor*

In New Brunswick, all land that is not privately-owned is known as Crown or public land and covers 48 per cent of New Brunswick's total land mass.

Until recently, six companies held licences issued by the province to log and manage these Crown lands. In order to increase Crown land wood production with all its attendant benefits, the provincial government authorized three studies over the last nine years.

This resulted in the Jaakko-Poyry report released in 2002 and the Erdle and Roberts-Woodbridge reports released last year.

In these reports, a variety of options were suggested, ranging from cutting less and conserving more to increasing by a significant amount both the cutting and the tree plantation acreage.

Last Friday, the provincial government released its long-term management approach for Crown forests. This new plan lays the groundwork for the foreseeable future, up to 100 years, with implementation in 2012. The benefit is increased wood production and the protection of an estimated 7,000 jobs in the wood industry.

The plan calls for old growth forest to remain at its current level of 25 per cent, protected areas to increase from 4 to 6-8 per cent, conservation forest area to be reduced from its current level of 30 per cent to 23-25 per cent and the maximum plantation area to increase from its present 25 to 28 per cent.

On the chopping block is 5-7 per cent of the Crown conservation area that is home to every species of woodland wildlife found in New Brunswick, from deer and moose to a wide variety of birds. Also, tree plantation acreage will increase by three per cent. As most are aware, single-species tree plantations offer little in the way of suitable habitat for most wildlife.

As a result of this new wood harvesting plan, the hunter, bird watcher, indeed, any New Brunswick resident who values our wildlife has been given the message that the wildlife habitat on our Crown lands is being cut in order to keep the forestry industry on an even keel.

While trees take 50 years or more to reach full maturity, wildlife is an every-year renewable resource that is a recreational benefit for all New Brunswick residents and more weight should be given to this.

Yet, we need to stand back and look at other factors concerning our Crown forest land. Until recently, those companies that held licences to log and manage Crown lands consisted of Bowater with their head office in South Carolina; UPM-Kymmene, head office in Finland; Weyerhaeuser, head office in Florida; J.D. Irving, with head office in New Brunswick; St. Anne Nackawic with head office in New York; and Fraser Papers, with their head office in Massachusetts.

One wonders how much of their profits are regularly re-invested in their mills and holdings in New Brunswick and how much leaves New Brunswick and flows to head offices located in other countries.

These companies are large in size, with many other holdings including mills and paper processing plants located around the world. As in most large world-wide companies, when profits decline it's time to close up shop, sell what they can and leave.

In 2004, UMP-Kymmene closed its Miramichi kraft pulp mill, with 400 jobs lost, followed by another 650 jobs when its other operations closed. In 2007, the company stated that it closed the mill because of worldwide industry overcapacity, the high Canadian dollar, and the high cost of wood chips, chemicals and other materials used in the process, with no prospects of the future being any better.

When Smurfit-Stone Container closed its pulp mill in 2005, Bathurst lost 267 jobs and in 2006, 140 Miramichi jobs disappeared when Weyerhaeuser closed its strand board mill. In 2008, Dalhousie lost 350 jobs when Abitibi Bowater closed its newsprint mill.

In September of last year, UPM-Kymmene hired a company to go into its Miramichi paper mill and make its two paper-making machines unusable so as not to be sold to competitors. Since then, it has sold this mill and related assets, including a groundwood pulp mill, woodlands operations and two sawmills located in Blackville and Bathurst to Umoe Solar of Norway for an undisclosed sum, although the company recorded an income of approximately 20 million euros from what it termed a "special item" or a "one-off item" in the first quarter of 2009.

These large companies play hardball, thus it's fair to say that with the disappearance of so many jobs, the provincial government may have found itself between a rock and a hard place in making the most recent decisions regarding the future of Crown lands and its attendant forest industry. Yet in the background there is now the Danny Williams factor.

Other issues in play include private woodlot owners having problems selling their wood and believing that companies cutting on Crown land offer unfair competition. Then we have the increased demand for forest biomass being used for everything from generating steam or electric power for mills, to making OSB strandboard, or as fuel for wood pellet stoves that are increasingly popular.

Yet, if too much biomass is removed from woodlands, those lands -- within two to three growing cycles -- will no longer grow trees. This concern is in the process of being looked at by both the province and the wood harvesting companies, with guidelines likely in place by April.

Then we take into account that where 100 men using saws and axes once harvested wood, those 100 have now been replaced by five working in rotation, and running a wood-harvesting machine that -- except for maintenance -- works 24/7.

One source stated that in one or more Scandinavian countries, a fully automated and computerized mill processing wood may employ only 30-40 people, yet in order to process the same amount of wood, an older mill in New Brunswick must employ 300. Another source, in reference to the Canadian forest industry, stated: "Most harvestable woodlands within reasonable hauling distance of current mills have now been exhausted."

The view from the sidelines is that every few years there is a demand to obtain more wood from Crown lands, and that after a study or two, it's granted, to the point that conservation areas and other wildlife habitat areas continue to decline while tree plantation acreage increases. Part of that is the need to keep jobs in the forestry industry, but that is not something that the province should hang its hat on, as permanent jobs have disappeared (see above), are disappearing, and will likely continue to do so in the future.

We need to work smarter, plan better, modernize mills, encourage and fund more value-added industries, and become more diversified.

Everett Mosher is an avid outdoorsman from Sackville. His column appears every Tuesday.