

Bruce Northrup defends forestry plan: Says it strikes the right balance between industry and environment

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New Brunswick's Natural Resources Minister Bruce Northup is defending the new provincial forestry policy against complaints from the industry and environmentalists.

Industry officials are disappointed the plan does not include a larger long-term timber objective.

And the Conservation Council of New Brunswick has concerns about the total conservation forest being reduced.

But Northrup contends his 10-year plan, released Friday, strikes the right balance.

“We were able to reach into the forest and put our people out in the woods and find more wood that we can process,” he said.

“And we feel as a management plan that we’ve met all the 20 of the provincial conservation objectives established to maintain healthy wildlife populations.”

The plan holds the line on the annual allowable cut for softwood lumber, such as spruce, fir and jack pine, at 3.27 million cubic metres - the same annual allowable cut as in the 2007-2012 management plan.

Meanwhile, the department is reducing the annual allowable cut for hardwood to 1.41 million cubic metres from 1.77 million cubic metres in the 2007-2012 plan to help ensure a sustainable supply.

The plan covers April 2012 until March 31, 2022.

Uncertainty hurts industry

The forest industry had been lobbying to make sure the annual allowable cut was not reduced.

“We do growth and yield models,” said Mark Arsenault, the president and CEO of New Brunswick's Forest Products Association.

"We forecast the rate of the forest and where it's growing. And especially where we've been planting trees for the last 50 years, those trees are actually growing much better with a lot less rot. And they're a lot more dependable in the quality that's coming out," he said.

"So it isn't that challenging to do a long-term timber objective."

Northrup said he realizes there will be a larger wood supply when a number of stands mature in 10 to 20 years, but he wants to make sure that wood grows and becomes more valuable before it's harvested.

J.D. Irving Ltd. officials have said they don't have the guaranteed wood supply necessary to reopen two of its mills.

The closure of the Deersdale mill near Juniper put more than 70 people out of work in October.

Another 73 people were put out of work in September when J.D. Irving closed its mill in Clair.

Added costs

The company's capital expansion plans are also on hold due to cost uncertainty associated with the government's plan.

Although they can continue to log on public lands for another 10 years at the same levels, Irving will have to harvest a larger area and some smaller trees, which are both expected to increase costs.

Northrup said he's willing to continue discussions with the industry about its concerns.

"That'll be an ongoing conversation in the future," he said.

"We hope to come to a compromise, but there are a lot of questions there. There's a lot of information there we need, a lot of information they need, and we'll sit down at the table and talk about it in the future."

Meanwhile, the plan has the province's largest environmental group concerned.

So-called protected natural areas of Crown land have grown by eight per cent, but 15 per cent of areas now designated for wildlife habitat are going to be opened up for logging.

The lands in question are primarily deer wintering yards in northern New Brunswick, according to the Conservation Council.

"We will be doing strip forestry in there and selective cutting in the conservation forest, but we feel it's going in the right direction to do that," said Northrup.