

## It's Groundhog Day (Again) in New Brunswick's Forests

Don Floyd

The forest products industry, the environmental community and the government have at least one goal in common—they are all trying to reduce uncertainty. The industry seeks an ever-increasing secure supply of fibre at an ever-diminishing price. The environmental community wants to ensure that biodiversity and ecosystem processes and services will be sustained in the face of intensive resource development and climate change. The government seeks to reduce the uncertainty of its fiscal prospects.

New Brunswick's current government is attempting to untie this Gordian knot. It is not the first to do so. The landscape is littered with oft-ignored forest policy reports (full disclosure: I am the co-author of one). The new forest strategy, which increases Crown softwood allocations at the expense of the designated conservation forest, has missed an opportunity to reframe the forestry debate and both increase the conservation values that citizens consistently demand and provide the wood fibre necessary for a sustainable forest industry.

Allocating (and reallocating) Crown forest resources among competing interests is akin to squabbling over who gets the biggest slice of pie. By choosing to focus only on Crown land, the government dooms natural resource managers and the public to a real-life version of the movie *Groundhog Day*.

Let's acknowledge that resource allocation on public lands is first and foremost a political process that is occasionally informed by science. Governments need tax revenue; forest products firms employ workers and pay taxes. In a difficult economy, forest sector jobs and taxes are important revenue sources that pay for health care, education and social assistance. Limited by some moderate guidelines for conservation, the more trees that are processed into lumber, chips and pulp, the more revenue is generated for government.

Many of the companies that are engaged in this business are very effective in influencing governments because of their shared interests. Over the past decade, New Brunswick's forest products firms and woodlot owners have been the recipients of millions of dollars in federal and provincial subsidies designed to grow more trees, increase competitiveness, protect jobs and (hopefully) increase tax revenues over time.

Crown forestland, however, is held in trust for the citizens; it must simultaneously serve public values like watershed protection, wildlife habitat and recreation. These values are not secondary to fibre production. They are equally important but they produce much less direct and indirect revenue for the government. As a result, community and environmental groups are often at a disadvantage in the

competition for resource allocations compared with the lumber and pulp and paper industries.

Here is where the missed opportunity lies: Private woodlot owners in New Brunswick are able to sustainably supply about 1.3 million cubic metres of softwood annually. In 2013, they harvested a little more than one-half that amount. New Brunswick's private woodlots could contribute more than enough softwood to meet the industry's demand without reducing conservation opportunities on Crown land. In addition, given the proper incentives, private woodlots can provide additional conservation opportunities. Instead of fighting over who gets the biggest slice of the existing Crown pie, the provincial government has the opportunity to make the pie larger.

Of course, the devil is in the details. Instead of a single source for Crown land, there are 43,000 woodlot owners and seven marketing boards to deal with when a purchaser seeks private timber. The relationship between the largest wood products firm in the province and several of the marketing boards can charitably be characterized as "rocky."

Nonetheless, a forest strategy that focuses only on Crown lands without applying an equal amount of forethought, effort and new policy approaches to private forests and how to sustain all of the values our forests provide guarantees that the familiar squabbling will persist.

Perhaps it is easier for the players that way. All of the actors—the government, the woodlot owners, the environmental community and the forest industry—know their roles and their lines. In the film, weatherman Phil Connors was able to escape the time loop only through focused self-improvement and reaching out to others. Perhaps thoughtful policy innovation and a focus on the values we share are the keys to escaping our dilemma.

I believe the public is getting tired of watching the same forest policy movie year after year.

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