

Wally Stiles rejected similar J.D. Irving Ltd. forest plan

Ex-Liberal DNR minister said the Alward government's Crown land deal could become an election issue

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Wally Stiles said J.D. Irving Ltd. asked him, when he was a natural resources minister, for a similar Crown land agreement as it recently signed with the Alward government. (Government of New Brunswick)

A former Liberal minister of natural resources says he never would have signed the new forestry agreement between the Alward government and J.D. Irving Ltd.

Wally Stiles said J.D. Irving Ltd. approached him about a similar deal when he was the natural resources minister in the Shawn Graham government but he rejected the proposal from the province's largest forest company.

"I refused to do that and if I was minister today, I would refuse again," he said.

While Stiles did allow more logging and smaller conservation areas when he was the natural resources minister, he said he would not go as far as the company wanted.

"Yes, we did reduce some of the [protected natural areas] and the conservation areas, to help out the industry at the time. But it was nowhere near the figures in the current deal that's being proposed," he said.

The Alward government announced its new forestry strategy in March, a plan that increased the amount of softwood the forestry sector can take from Crown land by 20 per cent.

Natural Resources Minister Paul Robichaud released the 25-year agreement between J.D. Irving Ltd. and the provincial government last week.

The agreement states JDI's annual allocation of timber is currently 2,045,000 cubic metres, which includes 1,500,000 cubic metres of spruce, fir and jack pine, 117,000 cubic metres of white pine sawlogs and 428,000 cubic metres of hardwood.

The new agreement will see Irving's annual allocation of spruce, fir, jack pine and white pine increase to 2,027,000 cubic metres, with a minimum of 1,898,000 cubic metres of spruce, up from the current level of 1,500,000.

J.D. Irving Ltd. committed to \$513 million in capital investments in its mills, most of which will be pumped into Irving Pulp & Paper in Saint John, as a result of the agreement.

Company defends new management provision

The 25-year deal also includes a provision to replace the existing management system with "outcome-based" management.

Green Party Leader David Coon contends that amounts to letting the company regulate itself.

"Outcome-based management is things like, 'We want you to make sure you don't screw up the rivers and you figure out how to do that,'" he said.

But the Natural Resources minister has said the change won't actually change much about how DNR oversees the Crown lease.

"Staff will do exactly the same evaluation," Robichaud said.

J.D. Irving Ltd. says the shift to a new management system on its Crown land lease will make it more accountable to the public.

In an emailed statement to CBC News, JDI vice-president Mary Keith says outcome-based management will mean more oversight of the company, not less.

She says the company will be required to meet objectives and targets laid out by DNR and there will be penalties if Irving doesn't hit the targets.

The company will have to post a performance bond guaranteeing its compliance, which will be assessed by a third party, Keith said.

Critics such as Coon, however, argue those targets themselves are skewed in favour of industrial output, while going easy on wildlife and biodiversity goals.

Could become election issue

The Alward government's Crown wood policy came up last week at the Liberal party's policy convention.

Liberal members voted for a Crown wood policy, skeptical of the government's forestry plan, but not really against it.

Stiles said the Alward government's agreement could become an election issue because many people are upset about it, particularly in rural New Brunswick.

He said letting industry harvest more Crown wood will hurt private woodlot owners. J.D. Irving Ltd., however, said it plans to increase the wood it buys from private woodlots by nine per cent.

Coon has also said he thinks the Crown forest policy should become an election issue.

Coon fought to get a copy of the provincial government's agreement with J.D. Irving Ltd. He's now exploring legal options to get access to blacked-out sections of the contract.