

Reform and Reorganize the Department of Natural Resources

We hear repeatedly from experienced woods people, conservationists and even retired DNR employees that the Department of Natural Resources is dysfunctional, tied to outdated policies and practices and too greatly influenced by a few privileged companies to manage our woodlands fairly or competently.

In 2010 the experts' panel advising on parks policy to the Steering Committee of the Public Consultation on Natural Resource Strategy reported that:

There is public concern that the Department of Natural Resources favours resource developments and exploitation over conservation and protection. While it is understood that the department is moving toward more ecosystem-based approaches to land and resource management, there is a need for a transformation of the departmental culture to one that embraces conservation values.

(<https://novascotia.ca/natr/strategy/pdf/phase2-reports/Parks.pdf>, p. 3)

The panel recommended that DNR 'should be reworked, restructured, and renamed to demonstrate a fundamental renewal, with emphasis on land stewardship, biodiversity conservation, protection of significant natural and cultural heritage, and an integrated approach to ecosystem-based planning and management.'

Eight years later nothing has changed. Ralph Surette, in a number of articles, has called for reorganization of DNR. Last December he described the department, 'with its pulp-company policy' as 'granitic and unchangeable as the hills.' A part of 'a bunged-up, secretive, white-knuckle.... bureaucracy immune to public opinion and seemingly a power unto itself beyond the clutches of merely elected governments.' (<http://www.thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1530031-surette-is-nova-scotia%E2%80%99s-public-policy-disease-incurable>)

He argues that the department 'torn between conservation and clearcutting, must be split up.' (<http://www.thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1237705-surette-natural-resources-torn-between-conservation-and-clearcutting-must-be-split-u> Sept. 19, 2014).

Noting that the former Bowater lands were Nova Scotia's 'last great wood basket' he urged the McNeil government to end the department's dual function as regulator and promoter of industry. Its conservation-related regulatory functions, he believes, should be 'hived off and given to the Department of the Environment.' Nearly four years later the western lands wood basket has been steadily depleted by WestFor, the consortium of forest companies licensed by the department to cut and manage them.

In its brief to the Lahey review of forest practices the Healthy Forests Coalition advocated a reorganization of DNR similar to the recommendation of the expert panel on parks policy.

We examined the *Forests Act* (<https://nslegislature.ca/sites/default/files/legc/statutes/forests.htm>) which has governed forest management since 1989. It was crafted in the heyday of the pulp and paper industry and was designed to maximize production of the softwoods essential to that industry. Since then the industry has declined in importance, here and across Canada.

Yet the management policies that the *Forests Act* authorized are still in place: the emphasis on clearcutting, short rotations, monocultures, even the use of pesticides and herbicides. Sadly, too, these policies permit the conversion of our Acadian forest to a boreal forest. They entrench the primacy of pulp and paper company operations, often through wasteful and unnecessary public expenditures.

These policies benefit one segment of the NS economy. They should promote the general public interest by recognizing broader economic needs, the significance of maintaining biodiversity and emerging social and climatic conditions.

We urge you, Members of the Legislator, to consider replacing the *Forests Act* with legislation reflecting values that are now prominent in society, including the traditional values of the Mi'kmaq and a modern appreciation of forest ecology.

Such legislation would identify the act's central concern as stewardship rather than exploitation. It would create a Forests Department with responsibilities for stewardship rather than forest exploitation. To that end it would differentiate responsibilities for stewardship from the business of allocating harvesting privileges to private sector interests.

That business would be carried out by a separate body given a very narrow mandate to advertise and sell short-term cutting licenses on lands designated by the Forest Department. The mandate would not extend to managing or monitoring harvesting. Those functions would be regulated by the Forests Department.

Our brief can be found at the home page of the Healthy Forests Coalition website: <https://www.healthyforestcoalition.ca>. *It addresses many of the issues that have been raised during the long public debate over Nova Scotia's forest policies and we hope that you will find it useful.*