

Chipping our forests on the cheap: MLA Memo for March 5, 2018

Biologist Bob Bancroft is known throughout the Maritimes for his understanding and encyclopedic knowledge of the region's wildlife. His career with the department now called the N.S. Department of Natural Resources enabled him to see at first hand the impact that modern industrial forestry has had on our wildlife.

In retirement he has become our leading spokesman for protecting wildlife habitat. It is a role that has led him to become familiar with Nova Scotia's forest industry, our management policies and industrial forestry practices. It also led him, with Donna Crossland, to write the ground-breaking report *Restoring the Health of Nova Scotia's Forests* (2010) which was an integral part of the public consultation on natural resource strategy.

In the following article, published in the *Chronicle-Herald* on February 7, he describes how recent government policies and business decisions are undermining the long-term future of our forests and the human and animal lives that depend on them.

He leaves us with a call to 'initiate sensible land and water stewardship with a new approach to forestry in Nova Scotia. One that's viable for forest-based industries, as well as nature and wildlife, over the long term.'

The Healthy Forest Coalition, and its many supporters, hope that in this session of the Legislature, you, our elected Members, will act on that call.

Bob's February 7 article can be accessed at <http://m.thechronicleherald.ca/business/1543413-commentary-chipping-our-forests-on-the-cheap>

If you don't have time to search for it, we have pasted it here:

COMMENTARY: Chipping our forests on the cheap - Public land and wildlife continue to be destroyed, yet are absent from industry costs

BOB BANCROFT

Pulp companies use softwoods like spruce to manufacture paper products. They obtain leases to cut wood on Crown land, in forests owned by the public.

The leases allow them to cut hardwood trees on Crown land. When other energy prices, such as natural gas, soar, it becomes economic to burn hardwoods in the

Point Tupper biomass plant to produce electricity, at an efficiency rate of less than 21.5 per cent.

To put this in perspective, a woodstove can have an efficiency rate about 80 per cent to produce heat.

Margins go up and margins go down, but one important aspect not factored into this equation as corporations adapt to profit, is the cost to wildlife. Animals are crushed under heavy equipment as they cower in their dens. Songbirds made their homes in these forests. They are nowhere on the financial statement. The cost to wildlife can be the ultimate price.

In September 2017, in spite of assurances to the contrary, the biomass plant at Point Tupper quietly resumed operation on a 24-7 basis. This plant requires 50 to 60 tractor-trailer loads of wood per day to keep it going. It's a mega-plant by North American standards, with Nova Scotia Power heavily involved. Earlier, people familiar with this industry protested to no avail. They knew that the emissions alone put this biomass facility in the same category as a coal-burning plant.

Ignoring this scientific fact, the provincial and federal governments and Nova Scotia Power have the nerve to label it "green, renewable" energy. Hardwood processors in Nova Scotia are currently scarce. Port Hawkesbury Paper (PHP) contractors are now buying hardwood processors.

These massive, heavy pieces of equipment are capable of levelling large maple and birch stands. To date, some of these trees were left standing because equipment could not cut them. Soon, this will not be the case.

An Irving contractor from New Brunswick is bringing at least one hardwood processor into Nova Scotia. Our red and sugar maples are chipped in Nova Scotia and trucked for processing at Irving mills in Sussex and Saint John. After delivering the maple chips to New Brunswick, trucks are returning loaded with low-grade biomass material to the plant in Point Tupper. This biomass facility is so large that we don't have enough forest to supply it!

The need for trees can't be fulfilled by seven eastern counties in Nova Scotia, so now our tax dollars will be partially funding the transportation costs. Maples go to New Brunswick, while our white and yellow birches are being trucked directly to the biomass plant at Point Tupper, where they are chipped in the yard to be burned.

PHP's hardwood prices paid to some contractors recently dropped from \$42 to \$32 per tonne. The rate for another contractor operating on Crown land is \$24 a tonne. Trucking rates vary by distance, but start at around \$13 per tonne. The industrial-strength forestry producing these chips results in thousands of acres of scattered clearcuts.

Large clearcuts are not a recommended harvest method for hardwoods. Clearcutting destroys prospects for the timely renewal of healthy hardwood forests on the site.

Trees with value-added potential, such as veneer or saw logs, are best harvested selectively, not with big machinery. So what price is our elected government exacting from corporations that are converting public hardwood forests to chips?

The provincial government may have a stated commitment to public transparency, yet the Details of Department of Natural Resources price agreements with PHP remain cloaked in secrecy. On any documents released to the public, stumpage fees paid to government by PHP are heavily redacted (blacked out). (Corruption expert Don Bowser, who has studied the use and misuse of public resources by governments around the world, suggests that the people of Afghanistan can obtain more resource information from their government.) Stumpage rates to be paid to government by the original Swedish owner of the Port Hawkesbury mill went off the financial rails in early negotiations decades ago.

Ignoring the going rate for stumpage, which at the time was \$4.40 per cord, then premier Robert Stanfield set the Crown stumpage rate at \$1 per cord.

At a meeting several years ago, one DNR government bureaucrat indicated that the stumpage rate set for wood from Crown (public) land was \$3.50 a tonne, but such a rate could be lowered to \$1 per tonne in “certain” circumstances. For those who are unfamiliar, a cord of eight-foot-long wood, in a pile, is about four feet high and four feet wide and weighs about two tonnes, so the return per cord of hardwood from public land could be as low as \$2.

Tractor trailer loads of hardwood on major highways could add as little as \$30 to \$34 to government coffers. Harvest sites may have 20 to 50 cords of standing wood per acre, which could generate revenues as low as \$40 to \$100 per acre.

One former DNR minister could not obtain the stumpage rate from his senior bureaucrats. In fact, the minister could not find where any payment had been made by one pulp mill. For such meagre sums, or less, public lands are being transformed to moonscapes. Wildlife populations are displaced and/or killed, soil nutrients flushed away, and land is left bare to release carbon dioxide from its soils into the atmosphere.

Erosion during rainfall events carries silt over open ground, clogging waterways that have inadequate, or no buffers. The resulting site conditions, with the losses of soil nutrients, exposure to direct sunlight and the drying effects of wind, favour the growth of pioneer species like fir, spruce, poplar and wire birch, rather than the yellow birch and sugar maples that were there.

Landowners who want to sell private wood are forced to compete with this outrageous pricing. Eight years ago, the provincial government assured us that the Point Tupper biomass plant would burn waste wood. To most folks, that meant leftovers from wood manufacturing, not entire tree trunks. Now hardwood forests and their wildlife habitats are being flattened at a furious pace for private profits from public lands. Since when was mature, uneven-aged hardwood forest “waste wood”?

This provincial government, in partnership with forest industries that include WestFor, is allowing the rampant destruction and degradation of the natural world, with a pittance going into public coffers in return. Taxpayers are cheated while the land is destroyed for generations. It’s time to demand government accountability. Why should public resources be extracted in a manner that undermines private wood suppliers, while pulp companies ignore good forest management practices, eliminating vast hardwood stands and destroying nature with impunity?

The bureaucrats responsible for giving away these public resources have faces. I know some of them. Explanations for their behaviour and abuse of power are essential to our democratic process. This is mining extraction with no thought for next generations, not sustainable forestry.

It’s time to initiate sensible land and water stewardship with a new approach to forestry in Nova Scotia. One that’s viable for forest-based industries, as well as nature and wildlife, over the long term.

Bob Bancroft is president of Nature Nova Scotia. He lives in Pomquet.

We also recommend that you read Bob’s opinion piece in the February 17 edition of the *Chronicle-Herald* calling for environmental oversight for clearcuts.

You can access it at <http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1537264-opinion-demand-environmental-oversight-for-clearcuts>

Several years ago he published a short prescription for beginning the long process of restoring our Acadian forest (something that industry experts claim is impossible).

You can access his prescription at <http://thechronicleherald.ca/thenovascotian/1174135-seed-trees-determine-future-of-nb-forests>