

Same chips, different pile? Forest tenure reform in Ontario

by Julee Boan

It has become increasingly common to open the newspaper these days and read a story of further forestry-related job layoffs in our region. By 2007, the Ontario Federation of Labour estimated a loss of 32,000 direct and indirect jobs. Approximately 260 communities have been impacted by the declining forestry sector, 28 of which were dependent almost entirely on the forest industry for their existence. Many think that the current downturn is not merely a valley in a boom and bust economy, but rather that a fundamental shift has occurred in the forestry sector. As such, even a so-called economic recovery in the province will not bring back the industry to its former standing. It seems increasingly unlikely that we will be able to simply blow the dust off idle mills to rebuild northern communities.

For several years, groups such as the Northern Ontario Sustainable Communities Partnership (NOSCP) have seen a silver lining in the current crisis. The NOSCP has been calling for reforms to the current tenure system: the legal arrangement that licenses timber extraction from publicly-owned forests to large forestry companies. They see that reform is needed to ensure that the residents of this region have greater rights and responsibilities over public forests in order to achieve community sustainability.

The Government of Ontario is responding to the demand for tenure and wood pricing reform by holding public open houses to obtain feedback on possible changes. However, many groups are concerned that the framework the Province is suggesting still focuses primarily on how to get more money from timber, and could merely result in adding new players (like biofuel harvesters) in the same old game. More fundamental reform is needed. First, decision-making needs to better balance community interests within the provincial regulatory structure. The current system locks up wood in licenses with many companies that are no longer operating. Communities need a real say in how those resources should be used. Second, any new tenure system should increase transparency regarding the financial and environmental condition of our forests. For example, tens of millions of dollars in stumpage fees and renewal funds have not been collected in an attempt to provide economic relief to cash-strapped corporations currently managing the forest. According to the Crown Forest Sustainability Act the wood is still the property of the Crown until these fees are paid. Essentially these companies have profited from the sale of public property, with little public discussion on whether or not this is the best strategy for communities.

There are alternative models. For example, over 10 years ago, British Columbia made amendments to their provincial Forest Act to enable the creation of community forest tenures. By 2003, the Minister of Forests had introduced a forestry revitalization plan which included a reallocation of 20% of the long-term logging rights held by major licencees to smaller ventures, including community forests (where communities take an active role in the planning, managing and harvesting of forest resources, and are therefore provided with a major proportion of the socio-economic and ecological benefits from the forest). There are now 33 community forests in BC, with 18 additional communities at some stage in the application process.

Models for community management are diverse, and experimentation and variation should be considered, even encouraged. The Ministry of Northern Development, Mines and Forests will be conducting open houses for public input on forest tenure and wood pricing reform in Thunder Bay on October 1 at the Travelodge Airline from 6:30 to 9:30 pm. This is an opportunity to have your voice heard.

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