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Ripping up the forests: Replacing a carbon sink with a carbon bomb

Ontario’s massive boreal forest takes carbon from the atmosphere and stores it safely away. That’s why it is literally vital to protect Ontario’s vast northern forests. The Doug Ford government intends to replace this valuable carbon sink with a carbon bomb by deregulating Crown land forestry, encouraging a cut and run approach to logging. Industrial scale clear cut logging may be good for the corporate bottom line. But it exacerbates climate breakdown. Clearcutting generates a massive release of carbon. In addition, our boreal forest is warming faster than many other places in the world. This double whammy will undermine a powerful defense against climate breakdown, creating a carbon bomb. The boreal forest needs protection. Not destruction.¹

Ford’s Forest Sector Strategy

In August of 2020 the Ford government announced its new policy for Ontario’s “Managed forests”. Typically, it had a bizarrely soothing title designed to disguise its real intent: “Sustainable Growth: Ontario’s Forest Sector Strategy.”² The scheme pays lip service to environmental considerations -- yet its goal is to enable a *doubling* of industrial logging.

The scheme to supercharge annual industrial wood production from 15

million cubic metres to 30 million cubic metres by 2030 is the centrepiece an effort to turn as much of the province’s managed boreal forest as possible into toilet paper, 2x4s, and new “high mass wood products.”

Sustainability Rules = “Red Tape”

The soothing chatter continues with a Forest Sector Strategy that’s closely tied to the Ford government’s attack on the “red-tape.” That’s a way to describe dismantling protections for the natural world. Protections used to be embedded in the Crown Forest Sustainability Act, the Environmental Assessment Act, and the Independent Forest Audit system. The omnibus Bill 229, *The Protect, Support and Recover from COVID-19 Act*, 2020³ (December 8, 2020) was designed to clear the



¹ “Canada’s Managed Forests Have Turned Super Emitters and 2018 Set A Record”, National Observer, June 2020: <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/06/05/opinion/canadas-managed-forests-have-turned-super-emitters-and-2018-set-record>

² <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-forest-sector-strategy>

³ “Ford’s Policies Dangerous to Trees, Cormorants and to Us”: , <https://www.animalalliance.ca/fords-policies-hurt-nature-and-us/>



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regulatory path for increased levels of resource extraction.

The Ford government has exempted Crown land forestry projects from environmental assessment regulations, aimed at ensuring that potential environmental effects are identified and remedied. Five-year Ministry of Natural Resources auditing periods had been designed to ensure compliance with provincial sustainable logging requirements. Bill 229 also permanently exempts Industrial forestry activities from Ontario's Endangered Species Act (ESA).

What Climate Emergency?

All of this comes during intense stress of forest ecosystems. Rising climate-driven insect infestations, wildfires, drought and extreme weather events.

Southern Ontario's average temperatures are rising at twice the global average while northern Ontario's are rising at three times that rate.

Given all the signs of increasing climate-driven stress and the net carbon emitting status of Ontario's boreal forest, Ford's Forest Strategy as well as his government's chosen means of clearing the path for its implementation has not been universally embraced, even in resource dependent northern boreal forest communities. A 2020 report "Will the Forestry Strategy Make Forestry Great Again?" by Ontario Nature's Thunder Bay researcher, Julee Boan points out this government's customary bafflegab. The Forest Sector Strategy "has been portrayed as a gift to the people of

northern and rural Ontario. It claims to herald a 'better quality of life,' secure 'a prosperous future,' and of course, to 'end unnecessary duplication.'"⁴

Canada is committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 40 - 45% from 2005 levels by 2030 and is relying on increased not diminishing levels of forest-based carbon sequestration capacity to meet those targets. With Ontario's (and Canada's) managed forests already emitting more carbon than they sequester that goal is no longer credible.

A "People and Climate First" Response

In place of a climate-blind Forestry Strategy that treats Indigenous communities as bystanders, we need an approach to our forests based on a recognition:

- ! Of the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples over their traditional territory, including the right to full, prior, and informed consent to all resource extraction related projects on their traditional territory;**
- ! That forests are living ecosystems essential to the health of the biosphere, a stable climate and all life on the planet;**
- ! That Ontario's managed forests are currently net sources of carbon emissions not carbon stores;**
- ! That healthy boreal forests are essential to sequestering carbon in their biomass, forest soils and associated peat lands.**

⁴ "Will the Forest Sector Strategy Make Forestry Great Again?", Ontario Nature, February 2020: <https://ontarionature.org/forest-sector-strategy/>