

PEI Watershed Alliance Forestry Committee – Initial Report – May 2023

The PEI Watershed Alliance Forestry Committee held 13 interviews with forestry stakeholders from December 2022 to March 2023. The stakeholders included politicians, farm groups, scientists, forest owners, conservation groups, and government staff.

The purpose of the committee is to promote the alignment of forestry and conservation policy and practice with climate change policy and practice in order to reduce forest area loss, increase long-term forest carbon storage, and ensure a healthy Acadian Forest on PEI for future generations. The aim is to better understand the complex relationship between these organizations' goals, visions, and targets, and the conflicts that arise from them.

This report is a combined summary of the main points raised during our interviews, and simply records the responses of the interviewees, and does not reflect the views of the committee members or the PEI Watershed Alliance. The interviewees are not identified.

Committee Members: Andrew Lush (PEIWA), Juliana Granzoti (PEIWA), John Lane (Cascompec Bay Watershed Association), Randy Angus (MCPEI), Eric Edward (Macphail Woods) and, for the initial meetings, Simon Wilmot who was a PEIWA employee at the time.

Summary

The top concern, voiced by 9 participants, was that the tax/incentives regime must be adjusted to support forestry.

The need for proper land use planning, and the need to pay forest owners for ecological goods and services, e.g. ALUS, was voiced by seven participants.

Five participants said that the FEP should include more long-term commitment from landowners, the FEP should be improved, and better promoted to landowners. Five also said that education is inadequate, and that all stakeholders must be involved in improving education.

Four participants stated the need for carbon revenue to support increased forest cover/retention. Four also said that we need to build resiliency into our forests in light of the Fiona damage.

Three participants said that private land ownership is a problem, and three also said that we need ways to provide added value to our forest products.

We asked what a forest is, and the most common response was: Bio-diverse, provides ecological goods and services, captures carbon, is cared for by Islanders, protects water quality, and is diverse.

Other comments made by more than one participant included promoting hardwood forests and ending clear-cutting for agriculture. A lack of communication between government departments, and that farmers find there are too many unanswered questions on reforestation and carbon, points to one of

the main themes that came up during the interviews: a general lack of education, information, and communication.

Comments on land use planning, tax incentives, and carbon markets:

We need to manage forest better, to give it value. There are not enough rewards for doing the right thing. We need better economic instruments to achieve forestation and climate goals, including tax incentives like sheltering forest income from tax, ALUS type payments for forest owners, and legislation to regulate the bottom 5 to 10% of landowners.

We need to 'un-tax' nature. Some farmland is replanted and then taxed at a higher rate instead of lower. Positive financial incentives are better than negative. Forestry based on an industrial model has in fact reduced the economic potential of our forests.

Our goal of protecting 7% of PEI is purposefully lower than other provinces because of our large amount of privately owned land. The 7% includes parks, conservation easements & NAPA land.

We need a provincial strategy that brings together all the stakeholders, a strategy that includes a land use plan, tax incentives, forest BMPs, training, monitoring, and enforcement.

Land Use Planning is essential. Private land ownership is the root of the problem. We need Land Use Planning if we are to increase forest cover. How do we reverse the trend of biodiversity loss if we don't have a REAL target, real monitoring, metrics, and a proper resource land use plan? The Land Use Plan needs to be removed from the hands of elected officials. No net loss would be a good goal.

It is easier to work with regulations within existing acts to achieve these goals.

Stop clearing for farmland, residential, or commercial use. PEI can't accommodate a large number of people with the current lack of rules.

The first priority, for carbon storage, should be protection of existing woodlands. The second should be 'planting with purpose', using local knowledge to get it right.

We would like to see watershed groups and co-ops managing larger areas of forest. There has been a failure to blend the goals of maintaining the ecological and economic value of forests. Without managing for improved ecosystems and forests in general, we will continue to have a failing, dependent forest sector with limited value-added benefits to local communities and landowners.

We should connect owners to carbon based revenue – continuous canopy cover, selective logging – this will become a large part of the picture. With carbon credits, the challenge is the size of parcels. The overhead is large, so we need groups and co-ops. Carbon credits drive re-forestation with Spruce trees. The current net zero plan includes an additional 5,000 acres of farmed spruce. Older woods reach an equilibrium of carbon. Newly planted forests can be carbon negative for a while, as the newly established underground ecosystem searches for and consumes carbon from the soil.

Carbon credits are complicated re indigenous rights.

Comments on Hurricane Fiona:

Fiona will speed up the natural processes of forest succession. We need to be careful what we do with leaning trees – fell them and leave them so they are no longer a fire hazard. Post-Fiona, we should leave dead wood around streams. This adds a lot of carbon to the soil, increases biodiversity, and slows run-off from fields. Carbon will be stored in the dead wood and the forest floor for decades.

Fiona makes people think forest is a risky investment, but it also shows the need for building resiliency in our forests. Fiona was a canary in the coal mine. It illustrated the massive problem of forest fragmentation, wind speeds relative to open fields, single species plantations etc.

Fiona has provided an increased opportunity to rebuild our rapidly depleted soil organic matter.

Now is a critical time to double-down on answering any questions around options to protect forests against the risk of natural disturbances, such as hurricanes.

We can't go wrong by planting trees, it is a whole ecosystem. But we need to figure out what to plant.

Comments by Farmers:

Many growers have land suitable for reforestation. The questions are: At what cost to us? Who does the work? Where do we get the trees? What revenue can forested land produce? Show us the benefits. In a survey of 51 potato farmers, 92% are interested in reforestation, particularly hedgerows and unproductive areas/buffer zones. 80% are interested in reforestation of woodland seriously affected by Hurricane Fiona.

Comments on Educating Landowners:

Watershed groups, and all levels of government, have a role in communicating the issues to the public. A grass-roots approach, a personal touch, is important. This is expensive and time-consuming. Agriculture and forestry groups need to do more education. We need to inspire landowners to protect their forests. There has recently been an increase in enrollment in the Forest Enhancement Program. Fiona is an opportunity to publicise the issues.

We need to adjust the Forest Enhancement Program to stop landowners exploiting the subsidies, with no long-term commitment to maintain their forests. Only about 10% of private forests are under the FMP.

It makes sense to do everything – old growth and harvesting and re-planting and new technologies. We need to promote hardwood re-forestation. We need more local added value, including a chipping plant.

We are part of nature, but care more about trees than a salt marsh. We should 'insert ourselves' into forests, rather than taking over their management. How we manage our forests are a representation of who we are as a culture or society.

Comments on what is a healthy forest:

A healthy forest is one where species at Risk are protected, it is bio-diverse, it provides ecological goods and services including human health and well-being and water capture, is cared for by Islanders, captures carbon, protects water quality. A climax, mixed forest with a diversity of plant and animal species, having a mix of different forest types depending on topography and drainage, a well established succession dominated by shade tolerant species.

Some say that a clearcut is still a forest.

The health of our community depends upon the health of forests, rivers, and farms.

Forestry Committee

PEI Watershed Alliance

contact: andrew@treesintrust.com