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## THE ALBERTA FOREST CONSERVATION STRATEGY REVISITED

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The Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy (AFCS) came into being in response to public concern over the state of the northern boreal forests (Report of the Expert Review Panel on Forest Management in Alberta 1990; Report of the Alberta Round Table on Environment and Economy, 1993); the National Forest Accord, to which Alberta and the forest industry in Alberta are signatories; and international initiatives such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, signed by the Prime Minister of Canada in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

Members of the Steering Committee (SC) were given to understand that the Provincial Government was seriously considering a change in the way in which forestry is done in Alberta. A new Forestry Act was a possibility.

The first few meetings that I attended were all about reaching consensus. The government clearly wanted consensus in the final report. When we finally turned our attention to forest conservation, the first step was to come up with a vision of Alberta's forests in the future. When some of us included "wilderness" in our vision we were voted down. When we tried other wording, such as "natural condition," or "primeval," or "pristine," or "healthy forest ecosystems" we met the same opposition. When it was suggested that climate and soils might have something to do with the future of the forests it was made clear that Alberta would have forests, period. The thought that forests might provide us and our descendants with ecosystem services, natural beauty, spiritual renewal, and the opportunity to experience wilderness, as well as material goods, was a non-starter. So much for consensus!

Prior to my joining the SC, five "Strategic Directions" had been identified. For each of the five a Working Group was assembled, and one or more members of the SC were attached to each of them. Eventually, each Working Group prepared a report, which was presented at one of the meetings of the SC.

Strategic Direction number one was to introduce Ecosystem (Ecological) Management to replace the current Sustained Yield Timber Management. The Report of the Working Group strongly supported Ecosystem Management as a move toward sustainable forestry.

The second objective was meant to achieve a Sustainable Forest Economy. The report of the Working Group recognized both market and non-market values of the forest, and the necessity for sustainable forests, but in the final report of the SC none of those points were even discussed. Alberta is unique in that it can have a sustainable forest economy without a sustainable forest!

The third objective was to establish, or complete, a network of Representative Protected Areas. I was assigned to represent the SC on that Working Group. Because Alberta was already committed to establishing protected areas when it signed on to the National Forest Strategy and the Convention on Biological Diversity there should have been no problem with consensus. There were spirited discussions at every meeting, but their final report did recognize a need for protected areas. I, and others on the SC, argued for at least some large reserves. We also proposed a program of study within some of the reserves to keep track of changes in flora and fauna over time. Our words fell on deaf ears on all counts.



The fourth objective was to introduce a Range of Management Intensities extending from full protection to total sacrifice of forest cover for construction of facilities. I, and others, urged adoption of Odum's four categories, one of which is that some land be kept in its natural condition. The flag went up and Odum was rejected.

The final objective was to Bring Forest Practices into line with the requirements of Ecosystem Management. Both logging methods and methods of forest regeneration were to be taken into account. Given that Ecosystem Management was not adopted, there was obviously no need to alter forest practices.

As time went on, it became clear that the government had an agenda that it was not about to change. Several members of the SC felt that we were embarking on a large-scale experiment based on a number of essentially untested hypotheses. That being the case we felt a need for a strong wording of the Precautionary Principle. The wording that made its way into the report was totally without value.

As weak as it was, the final report was apparently too controversial to be released to the public. Nor would the government release the reports of the Working Groups. In their place, we got a "Forest Legacy."

The Forest Legacy is a shameful transformation and denial of a process that went on in good faith for more than three years and cost in the vicinity of \$400,000. What a price to pay for a poorly written, messy little document, printed on cheap paper reminiscent of the paper used in the former USSR, and "full of sound and fury signifying nothing"!

A legacy is something of value handed down by a predecessor. What we will hand down will be nothing more than a bunch of trees planted in neat straight lines. They will probably all be of one species over huge areas. Undergrowth, from mosses to shrubs, will be strictly controlled. Such simplified tree farms will not support a diversified flora or fauna. They may retain some economic value, but what about the non-market values that we find in natural forests? It seems unlikely that those who inherit the legacy will ever see a real forest large enough to get lost in.

*(Bill Fuller began his professional career as a federal civil servant "north of 60." After 12 years in the north he spent 25 years in the zoology department of the University of Alberta. He now lives a few miles north of Athabasca.)*