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Alberta Refuses to Sign Canada Forest Accord

By Shirley Bray

Alberta and Quebec are the only two Canadian jurisdictions that have refused to sign the *Canada Forest Accord 2003-2008*. Alberta was noticeably absent at the annual meeting of the National Forest Strategy Coalition (NFSC) in early March.

Representatives of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development told AWA in a meeting in March 2005 that they could not agree with some of the wording. AWA Past-president Cliff Wallis advised them that AWA did not agree with all of the *Accord* either, but that we did agree with the principle, and he encouraged the government to sign on.

"We are optimistic that Alberta will reconsider its position and sign on to this important forest strategy," says Wallis. "Failure to commit to the *National Forest Strategy* will continue to endanger Alberta's forests and be a disservice to the millions of Albertans who want to see natural ecosystems and wildlife adequately protected."

The NFSC describes the *Accord* as "a formal commitment among diverse groups with different perspectives and objectives to work together on a solution to the challenges facing our forest, while using the *National Forest Strategy* (NFS) as the reference document."

More than 60 aboriginal, industry, government, and environmental organizations have signed this third *Accord* so far. It commits signatories to maintain Canada's forest health for the benefit of all living things and for the social, cultural, environmental, and economic well-being of all Canadians.

The 2003–2008 NFS is the fifth in a line of forest strategies dating back to 1981 that outline broad goals and objectives for the forest sector in Canada. The NFSC, composed of governmental and non-governmental organizations, was formed by the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers in 1992 to oversee the implementation of the strategies.

The NFS is a consensus document developed with extensive consultation with the broad forest community, but its implementation is voluntary. The current NFS is the first one that has been developed with the active involvement of major environmental groups.

Two of the principles of the *Accord* that deal with public involvement are:

- (1) Comprehensive information about the state of the forest and the social well-being, environmental services, and economic wealth that are derived from forest conservation and use must be available publicly.
- (2) As stewards of forest heritage, Canadians continually seek: to improve the quality of information, public involvement, and reporting; to promote the public accountability of all those involved in forest conservation and use; and to communicate their vision, goals, and results.

Specific commitments of the NFS include:

- (1) Ecosystem-based management of natural forests including:
 - integrated land use planning before tenure allocations;
 - maintaining natural forested ecosystems;
 - completing a representative system of protected areas; and
 - conserving old-growth forests and threatened forest ecosystems.
- (2) Adopting policies and actions that support forest-based community sustainability.





(3) Accommodating aboriginal and treaty rights in the sustainable use of the forest.

Environmental groups recognize that the 2003–2008 NFS is a significant improvement over past strategies, but are concerned that because the commitments are not legally binding they may not be followed up with action.

“Ultimately it is just words on paper unless there is the political will from government, industry and all stakeholders to move towards the implementation for the Strategy’s objectives, through policy reform and improved on-the-ground management practices,” says Sierra Club’s Rachel Plotkin. “Political will is fuelled by the public,” she adds.

Scientist Loys Maingon, in a review of a draft of the NFS, noted that “although it claims to formulate a forest strategy based on the best available science, [the NFS] is primarily an economic and political document in which science plays a tertiary role, although science is claimed to be the guiding principle” (Canadian Society of Environmental Biologists Newsletter, Fall 2003). The current model used for forest management, sustainable yield, will not maintain sustainable forests, he says. “The model should be a transition to increased agroforestry to meet wood resource needs, and the creation of vast interconnected biotic reserves to maintain ecosystem services and biodiversity.”

