
Reflection on Alberta Forest Week

This May, the Government of Alberta celebrated another Alberta Forest Week, a week dedicated to recognizing the importance of Alberta's forests and their contributions to Albertans. Alberta's forested lands make up over 60 percent of our province, stretching from the southernmost tip of Alberta's Eastern Slopes northward into the vast expanse of boreal forest.

Devin Dreesen, the newly-minted Minister of Agriculture and Forestry celebrated the week by visiting schools, educating students on the importance of sustainable forest management, and handing out lodgepole saplings as inspiration. As is often the case with commemorative days, this was primarily an opportunity to applaud contributions from the Alberta's forestry sector and advertise Alberta as first in class for sustainable management. The end goal? Not a version of sustainable management privileging biodiversity, as one might

assume, but to ensure Alberta receives its "proper national share of trade-allocated export quotas" and improves "export opportunities, especially in Asia."

If you only skimmed the hashtags on Twitter during Alberta Forest week, you would be under the impression that the future is bright for timber production in and exports from Alberta. However, if you've spent any amount of time in Alberta's forested public lands, you'll know that not all is well in the woods.

Alberta's forest industry has seen a 600 percent increase in forest harvest since 1961. But we haven't seen the same increases in efforts to replenish stands. Without attention to that side of the forestry ledger we've seen the rapid decline of viable forest habitat, severely reduced water quality and fish habitat, and a substantial decrease in carbon storage.

The same week in May, *The Narwhal* published an article confirming that, contrary to popular belief, Canada's forests are now a net source of carbon emissions. Trees are dying at two to four times the rate prior to 2000. Since 2001, the impacts of drought, fire, and pests means that Canada's forests are emitting substantially more carbon into

the atmosphere than they are sequestering.

For Alberta, global climate change likely means mega-fires, pest outbreaks, and premature tree deaths are only going to become more prevalent. This demands rethinking what constitutes the acceptable standard of "sustainable forest management."

In addition to focusing on potential markets, Alberta's Forest Week should also be an opportunity to take a more holistic view of our forests and the benefits they provide us. How is industry considering impacts across the landscape and watershed in forest harvest? Are clearcuts really a "first in class" sustainable method of forest harvest? And importantly, how can we ensure that Alberta's forests become carbon sinks?

Before next year's Forest Week, I would like you to consider these questions and even send a letter to Minister Dreesen (af.minister.m@gov.ab.ca) with your thoughts on what a sustainable forest looks like. The viability of our future forests, whether for habitat, source water, or economic well-being, depends on us having the self-awareness necessary to acknowledge that forest health is declining and the foresight to do something about it.



Habitat fragmentation, sediment-loading and carbon storage loss are among the side-effects of Alberta's current "sustainable" forest management regime. PHOTO © N. DOUGLAS