

Forestry's Slippery Slope

A potential turning point for Ontario's forest economy.

by Peter Politis | Jun 2013

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June 16, 2013 - In my role as mayor, I spend a lot of time looking ahead to what our opportunities may or may not be in northeastern Ontario and where the future lies in between. The more I think about this, the more I understand that we may be realizing a strategic turning point in the forest economy that could be a game changer in the landscape ahead. It is the point where the forest economy may be getting so far down the slippery slope of environmental extremism that it may not be able to return.

The Abitibi River Forest, located in northeastern Ontario, has become a key battleground in the progression of the regression of the forest industry. The rigid application of a provincial policy known as the Caribou Conservation Policy has led to a long-term direction in the Forest Management Plan that could see up to 65% of the sustainable forest volume lost in just 25 years. This will be devastating to, and place a dangerous risk on, the \$8-billion dollar industry between North Bay and Hearst that directly sustains over 8,000 families in the region. Curiously, all this risk and instability is the result of the province attempting to recover caribou where they don't live, in an area where there is double the disturbance threshold that caribou need to survive, and despite there being over 2.8 million caribou in Canada at this time.

Even more curiously, the province, with no peer review science or socioeconomic impact assessments, has no apprehension in forcing this direction. This in itself should be a flag of just how far down the slippery slope of extremism the industry and those who depend on the forest are headed.

The justification by the province is that the local industry has never cut more than the volume of 2004, and, as such, the surplus can be set aside for this initiative. However, the problem with this thinking is that the industry was harvesting on a two-shift basis between recessions over the past decade, in a climate where investment has not been encouraged. Also, there is still one-third more sustainable volume available that we should be pursuing to grow the economy, not just minimize and sustain it.

If Ontario caps the volume available for the forest economy, that environmentally sustainable third-shift possibility and access to record high prices, and all the jobs that come with it, will likely go to Quebec while Ontario pursues the ill-conceived recovery of caribou. That pursuit comes in a region where the disturbance levels will not even foster the recovery of caribou, where the forests are already world-renowned for their environmental standards toward the entire ecosystem and where the cost of this effort will be the extinction of whole communities along with the thousands of families they sustain.

This type of irrational consequence is the result of the escalation of overregulation and the neutering of the fortitude the industry requires to defend itself against the threat. Extremism will continue to create fear around the need to protect our forests despite them being the most environmentally sound forests in the world. If this pattern continues, where extremists take more of a foothold and the industry continues to capitulate out of fear, our hope for growing a vibrant Northern Ontario will disappear.

However, let me suggest that when our own government becomes a part of the extremism and begins to force implementation despite the facts and all reality, this is the strategic turning point in the Ontario forest economy.

As Northerners, we need to be smarter! We need to start marketing the realities and do the same as the NGOs have in terms of getting to the nine million constituents between Windsor and Toronto who influence policy. We need to come together as industry, local leaders and the people of the region to create a strong and formidable united front. Industry needs to start pushing back and recognizing that without this pushback it is ultimately doomed.

We as Northern Ontarians, who have everything to lose and everything to gain, must get organized and start taking control of our own lives. We need to stop complaining about how bad we have it and take charge together. Because if we don't come together, if we don't get organized and we don't collectively take charge, we will have no one to blame, when it is all said and told, but ourselves!

Peter Politis is the mayor of Cochrane, Ont., where you can swim with polar bears.