

Forest Management in Alberta: Provincial Forestry Policy

Overview of the forest industry:

- Since the early 1960s, forest harvesting in Alberta has been increasing at an exponential rate.
- In 1998, 61,222 ha of forest were harvested in Alberta, producing 18.7 million m³ of timber.
- Alberta wood product exports include wood pulp (47%), softwood lumber (30%), waferboard (17%), and newsprint (6%).
- Major export markets for Alberta wood products are the United States (71%), Japan (11%), and Europe (6%).
- Revenue to the Government of Alberta, in the form timber royalties and fees, was \$80.3 million for the fiscal year 1999.

Forest tenure system:

- There are three types of timber allocation in Alberta: timber permits, timber quotas, and Forest Management Agreements (FMAs).
- Timber permits involve relatively small volumes intended for smaller operators and community use.
- Quotas are intended to provide small to medium-sized operators with a long-term secure wood supply. As of 1996 there were approximately 50 registered quota holders in Alberta. Forest management planning for quota holders is primarily the responsibility of the government. Instead of a fixed land base they are allocated a specific volume of timber.
- An FMA is a long-term contractual agreement between the province and a company to establish, grow, and harvest timber on a defined land area. As of 2000, 11 companies held one or more FMAs in Alberta and two other FMAs were pending. FMA holders must develop and follow a management plan that is approved by the government. They are also responsible for their own inventory studies, road development, and forest regeneration.
- The five largest FMA holders in Alberta as of 2000 are (in order of size): Alpac, Tolko, Weyerhaeuser, Daishowa-Marubeni, and International Paper (which owns Weldwood and Sunpine).

The Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy:

- The *Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy* is the product of over three years work by a broad multi-stakeholder group, facilitated by Alberta Environmental Protection. Given this broad representation and concerted effort, the *Conservation Strategy* is the best available guide to the vision and goals held by Albertans regarding public forests.
- A fundamental principle of the *Conservation Strategy* is that forest ecosystem health must be maintained if we are to continue to receive benefits from the forest in the future.

- To maintain ecosystem health the *Conservation Strategy* recommends “that the Government of Alberta and forest land users adopt and implement ecosystem-based forest management as quickly as practicable.”

Current government policy:

- The *Forests Act* provides the legal framework for management of forests in Alberta. It defines the basic rules governing forest tenure and provides the Minister and Cabinet with the power to set policies and regulations governing logging methods, wood utilization standards, and broader issues concerning use of forest land. The *Act* itself provides minimal guidance as to how the forests should be managed, except that the harvesting of timber should be designed to provide a perpetual sustained yield.
- Current government forestry policy is summarized in *The Alberta Forest Legacy*. The *Forest Legacy* accepts the vision, goals, and principles of the *Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy*; however, it provides little direction for actual implementation and is largely devoid of explicit commitments or measurable objectives.
- At the implementation level, existing rules and regulations are still fundamentally based on the concept of sustained-yield management. What this means in practical terms is that the annual rate of cut cannot exceed the annual rate of tree growth, less losses due to natural causes. The concept predates ecosystem-based management; therefore, there are no explicit requirements to maintain ecosystem integrity or to conserve biodiversity.
- The government’s intent to move beyond sustained-yield management is expressed in the *Interim Forest Management Planning Manual*, which was developed to guide FMA holders in their development of management plans. However, as with the *Alberta Forest Legacy* document, the *Interim Forest Management Planning Manual* provides no direction to companies on how they should implement ecosystem-based management. There is no list of required elements, nor any definition of minimum standards.
- In summary, although the provincial government has accepted the goals and principles of the *Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy*, there is no indication that it intends to take a leadership role in implementing it. Instead, it appears to be developing a flexible policy framework that will allow companies to implement ecosystem-based management at their own pace, to the extent that they are inclined to do so. This may indicate that there is little internal support for ecosystem-based management within the government, or that the political will required to implement major changes in forestry policy is lacking. A major problem facing the government is that there is little flexibility in the system for decreasing the annual allowable cut (which is required to implement certain features of ecosystem management) because of previous timber allocation decisions based on maximizing utilization.