

# **Whatever Happened to the Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy?**

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Over 800 people and three years of dedicated effort. That's what it took to craft the *Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy*<sup>1</sup>. Now, five years later, it's time to take stock. What changes have actually taken place on the ground? How far along are we in achieving our vision? And where do we go from here?

The *Conservation Strategy* embodies the vision that Albertans hold for their forested lands and presents a blueprint for how that vision can be achieved. Representatives from over 60 stakeholder groups, representing essentially every organization in the province with an interest in forests (including industry and government) were involved in its development. In addition, there were 16 rural Community Working Groups, Urban Working groups in major centres, and seven technical working groups. As a consequence of this broad participation and depth of effort the *Conservation Strategy* stands as the best available guide to how our forests should be managed.

The motivation for development of the *Conservation Strategy* came from broad recognition that existing forest policy, based on sustained-yield management, was obsolete. In practical terms, sustained-yield management means that the annual rate of cut cannot exceed the annual rate of tree growth, less losses due to natural causes. There is no mention of maintaining biodiversity or forest health because the sustained-yield concept was developed at the time when forests were valued for little else besides the flow of timber. Today we recognize that timber is only one of many benefits provided by the forest. Moreover, we now understand that that the integrity of the forest ecosystem as a whole must be maintained if the forest is to provide us with the many benefits we desire, along with the flexibility to meet different needs in the future. These observations form the heart of the *Conservation Strategy*:

*“The Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy calls for significant change in how activities are planned and carried out in forest ecosystems at the legislative, commercial and personal level. The forests of Alberta will be appreciated as ecosystems and our activities managed in ways that conserve ecological integrity, biological diversity, long-term forest productivity and the forest landbase.”<sup>1</sup>*

## **Where are we now?**

What has happened since those heady days in the mid-1990s, when the winds of change had us all moving so boldly forward? Given the enormous effort that went into the process, and the consensus that was achieved, it seemed that implementation would quickly follow. Indeed, for a number of months in 1997 I sat on an Implementation Working Group that was to devise a plan for putting the new ideas into action. Unfortunately, the report of Implementation Working Group was never to see the light of day. It, along with the *Conservation Strategy*, and promises to update the *Forests Act*, were quietly placed on the shelf. In their place the government released policy documents, such as *The Alberta Forest Legacy*, that were filled with platitudes about sustainability, but devoid of actual commitment to change. Government actions since the release of the *Conservation Strategy* indicate that its core policies remain unmodified. Sustained-yield management continues to be the standard for awarding new timber

allocations, setting annual harvest levels, and defining acceptable operating practices<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the government's goal of maximizing harvest levels (under sustained-yield management) remains intact:

*Forest Industry Development Target: Increase the timber cut and reduce the gap between the harvest and the Annual Allowable Cut (AAC) cap.*<sup>3</sup>

It seems inconceivable that the government could so blatantly disregard such a clear mandate for change. But the news is not all bad. The vacuum in leadership created by the government's lack of commitment to stewardship of the forest is being filled by some of the province's more progressive forestry companies. The actions of these companies largely reflect increasing demand for responsible forest management by the markets these companies serve.

### **Ecological forest management**

To review the extent to which the *Conservation Strategy* is being implemented I will begin with its core strategic direction — ecological forest management. Ecological forest management is based on the idea that the integrity of forest ecosystems can be maintained if industrial activities are made to approximate natural disturbances, such as fire. In practice, this means that the structures and patterns characteristic of natural forests, from individual stands to broad landscapes, need to be maintained in managed forests. In contrast, the sustained-yield approach seeks only to maintain the flow of timber.

A recent review of forest management plans by Forest Watch Alberta<sup>4</sup> found that the language of ecological forest management is becoming widely adopted by forestry companies in the province. However, only Alpac and Daishowa-Marubeni have management plans that are actually based on ecological forest management principles, as described in the *Conservation Strategy* and scientific literature (albeit, with various shortcomings). Weyerhaeuser has also embraced ecological forest management, but its transition from sustained-yield management is less advanced. Most of the remaining Forest Management Agreement (FMA) holders are pursuing hybrid strategies that combine sustained-yield, ecological management, and habitat supply for indicator/priority species. Alberta Newsprint, Tolko, and West Fraser continue to operate on the basis of sustained-yield management and declined to provide any details regarding their future plans when surveyed. Smaller forestry operators, responsible for approximately half of the coniferous harvest and one-third of the deciduous harvest, also operate on the basis of sustained-yield management, by virtue of the fact that management planning for these companies is done by the government.

Alpac's management plan is illustrative of the current state of the art of forestry in Alberta<sup>5</sup>. The plan includes three elements that are critical to the successful implementation of ecological forest management: (1) it defines key forest attributes that must be maintained in order to maintain ecological integrity, (2) it sets management targets for those attributes, based on emulating natural forest structure and pattern, and (3) it outlines strategies for achieving those targets. The strategies employed are wide-

ranging, reflecting the fact that maintaining an ecosystem is far more complex than maintaining a crop of trees. Key strategies include:

- Improve understanding of the natural disturbance regime, and resulting stand structure and landscape patterns, through field research and detailed inventories;
- Cut whole stands in order to maintain natural stand shape and size distributions (in place of uniformly-sized square cutblocks);
- Leave clumps of merchantable live trees within cutblocks to provide residual structure within regenerating stands;
- Allow some merchantable stands to remain unharvested, in order to achieve old-growth targets;
- Employ new harvesting and regeneration techniques aimed at maintaining mixedwood stands (coniferous and deciduous), instead of eliminating this stand type from the landscape through conversion to pure stands;
- Establish a protected area within the FMA to serve as an ecological benchmark;
- Monitor the landscape to determine if natural patterns are being maintained. Also monitor biodiversity directly to ensure that unforeseen problems are not occurring;
- Initiate integrated planning with other companies operating in the FMA, including smaller forestry companies and oil and gas companies.

As a case study, Alpac also provides insight into some of the challenges and barriers to implementing ecological forest management. A basic challenge, that Alpac is still struggling with, is that scientific understanding of natural patterns and processes is far from complete. As a consequence, Alpac's management plan amounts to a grand experiment — that may or may not have a favourable outcome. There have also been challenges in developing and implementing new operating practices that have yet to be overcome. These include everything from developing new computerized planning tools to retraining field workers. At a more fundamental level, Alpac has a billion-dollar mill that its owners expect to run at full capacity. As a result, planning staff are faced with significant limitations in their ability to set targets that truly emulate natural structures and patterns. For example, old-growth targets (8%) and the amount of trees left on harvest blocks (5%) are both substantially below what occurs naturally.

Finally, even though the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers and the Alberta Forest Products Association were signatories to the *Conservation Strategy*, the objective of developing an ecological management plan that integrates the activities of all resource companies on the FMA remains as elusive as ever. Alpac's efforts to integrate the activities of the oil and gas industry have not proceeded beyond a few pilot projects aimed at reducing duplication in road building and reducing timber damage. Consequently, the cumulative rate of harvesting on the FMA (11,000 ha/year by the oil and gas companies, 10,000 ha/year by Alpac, and 6,000 ha/year by other forestry companies<sup>6</sup>) substantially exceeds the natural rate of disturbance. Furthermore, the oil and gas industry refused to support Alpac's proposal for an ecological benchmark in the Liege watershed<sup>7</sup>, and instead has actually increased its activity in this part of the FMA. Alpac's progress at integrating the activities of smaller forestry companies on the FMA has been greater, but at the expense of diluting the principles of ecological forest

management. For example, coniferous operators will only be required to leave 1% of merchantable trees on cutblocks, and they will be permitted to employ intensive forest management techniques.

### **Protected areas**

Protected areas are another strategic direction of the *Conservation Strategy*. Given that the emulation of natural disturbances is in essence an untried management experiment, and given that implementation is bound to be incomplete, protected areas play an important role in the management of risk. Simply put, it would be foolish to put all of our eggs in the ecological management basket. Protected areas also serve as ecological benchmarks (or baselines), providing a reference for monitoring the effects of industrial practices on the managed landscape. Unfortunately, the establishment of ecological benchmarks was not accepted as a mandate of the Special Places 2000 process (in spite of an explicit recommendation in the *Conservation Strategy*). Consequently, protected areas established under Special Places 2000 are either unrepresentative of merchantable forest or too small to serve as useful benchmarks.

On a positive note, significant progress has been made in the development of a provincial biodiversity monitoring program<sup>8</sup>. The program, now ready for implementation, is world class in terms of scope and methodology. Ironically, it was industry that initiated the biomonitoring program, not government — further evidence that the government has abdicated its role as public steward of the forest.

### **Participation and Partnerships**

Another strategic direction of the *Conservation Strategy* is “participation and partnerships”. This part of the *Strategy* is concerned with how decisions regarding management of the forest are made. It contains two central recommendations<sup>1</sup>:

*“Meaningful public involvement must be an integral component of all major decisions.”*

*“All information used in planning and decision-making processes should be available to those who wish to be involved.”*

Neither of these recommendations have been implemented. An obvious case in point is the government’s decision not to implement the *Conservation Strategy*, in blatant disregard of the public’s will. Furthermore, as evidenced by negotiations with Grande Alberta Paper over the past several years, major decisions concerning forest allocations continue to be made in secret.

Access to relevant information also continues to be a major barrier to meaningful public involvement. Forest inventories are considered proprietary information and gaining access to forest management plans is generally problematic (even though the Internet provides an obvious mechanism for facilitating access). Only four companies were willing to cooperate with Forest Watch Alberta in its survey of operating practices on

behalf of the public<sup>4</sup>. Finally, most government information pertaining to the oil and gas industry is only available through a user-pay system that does not differentiate between industrial users and the public. Even trying to determine which public lands are leased to oil companies will cost you money.

### **The road forward**

The progress that Alpac and Daishowa have made in revamping harvest planning and practices provides a measure of what could have been accomplished province-wide, had leadership been shown by the government. However, through the lens of five years of hindsight it now seems clear that orchestrating meaningful change was never the government's intent. Rather, faced with broad recognition that existing forestry policies were obsolete, the government used the *Conservation Strategy* in an attempt to pour old wine into new bottles. Political scientist Jeremy Wilson recounts the use of similar tactics, which he terms "symbolic politics", in British Columbia:<sup>9</sup>

*"An aroused public is placated by a symbol-laden policy response. In the ensuing mood of quiescence, the authorities proceed to nullify the putative intent of the policy, their efforts largely unnoticed by the public. Those disposed to question policy are confronted by flux, uncertainty, and complexity — by a picture that is well designed to overwhelm all but the most skilful and persistent critics"*

But, there are reasons to be hopeful that the public's vision for the forest may yet be achieved. First, regardless of the government's original intent, the *Conservation Strategy* stands as an unassailable benchmark for how our forests are to be managed. As such it provides a new set of measures against which the government can and should be held accountable. For example, eight years after committing to update its policies, why is the government still allocating timber and regulating operating practices on the basis of sustained-yield management? Why are there no limits on the cumulative impacts of resource companies working the same land base? Where are the ecological benchmarks? And why has the *Forests Act* still not been updated to reflect the principles of the *Conservation Strategy*? Individuals and organizations that value Alberta's forests and wildlife need to begin asking these questions of their elected representatives, and keep asking them until satisfactory answers are forthcoming.

Another reason for optimism is the advent of forest certification through the Forest Stewardship Council<sup>10</sup>. Once fully established this international initiative will provide consumers with the opportunity to selectively buy wood products from forests that are being managed to maintain health and integrity. Standards for certification, incorporating the principles of the *Conservation Strategy*, are now being developed in Alberta. Although there is not yet an adequate supply of certified wood products, major retailers, such as Ikea and Home Depot, are strong proponents of the program. Individuals that wish to become involved should write to companies that make and sell wood products and request that they provide products certified under the Forest Stewardship Council program.

In contrast to many other parts of the world, the opportunity to do things right still exists in Alberta. Our forests have come under pressure, but they still resilient. Moreover, we have in the *Conservation Strategy* a map that shows us the road forward. Now it's time to pick ourselves up and get moving.

**Citations:**

<sup>1</sup>The *Alberta Forest Conservation Strategy*. 1997. Available at: [www.borealcentre.ca/reports/afcs.html](http://www.borealcentre.ca/reports/afcs.html)

<sup>2</sup>Alberta Sustainable Resource Development. 2001. *Management of Alberta's Forest Resource*: p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Alberta Resource Development. 2001. *2000-2001 Annual Report*: p. 43.

<sup>4</sup>Forest Watch Alberta. 2001. *Planning and Practices Survey of FMA Holders in Alberta*. Available at: [www.forestwatchalberta.ca/forestry/survey.html](http://www.forestwatchalberta.ca/forestry/survey.html)

<sup>5</sup>Alpac. 1999. *Detailed Forest Management Plan*. Available at: [www.alpac.ca/](http://www.alpac.ca/)

<sup>6</sup>Pope, D. 2001. Integrated landscape management on the Alpac FMA. In: *Oil And Gas Planning On Forested Lands In Alberta: Overview Of CIF-RMS Technical Session, March 23, 2001*. Canadian Institute of Forestry, Edmonton, AB.

<sup>7</sup>Manning, D. (CAPP). 1997. Correspondence on record with the Alpac Forest Management Task Force.

<sup>8</sup>Alberta Forest Biodiversity Monitoring Program web page: [www.fmf.ab.ca/bm/bm.html](http://www.fmf.ab.ca/bm/bm.html)

<sup>9</sup>Wilson, J. 1998. *Talk and Log: Wilderness Politics in British Columbia, 1965-96*: p. 90. UBC Press

<sup>10</sup>Forest Stewardship Council web page: [www.fsccanada.org/](http://www.fsccanada.org/)