

CANADIAN  
**BOREAL**  
INITIATIVE



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**BORÉALE**  
CANADIENNE

# The Boreal Forest at Risk: A Progress Report

**June 23, 2003**

Fourth anniversary of  
*Competing Realities: The Boreal Forest at Risk*  
by the Senate Committee  
on Agriculture and Forestry

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## **ABOUT THE CANADIAN BOREAL INITIATIVE**

The Canadian Boreal Initiative is working with a wide range of conservation organizations, First Nations, industry and other interested parties to link science, policy and conservation activities in Canada's boreal forest. The CBI's long-term vision is to safeguard the balance of nature for all time in Canada's boreal forest through:

- an interconnected network of large-scale protected areas and conservation lands;
- state-of-the-art sustainable development practices on the remainder of the landscape; and
- local community and First Nations engagement on land management decisions.

Visit [www.borealcanada.ca](http://www.borealcanada.ca) for related materials.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1999, the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry's Subcommittee on the Boreal Forest published *Competing Realities: The Boreal Forest at Risk*. The Subcommittee Report contained 35 recommendations intended to ensure that Canada adopt "a natural forest landscape-based approach to managing a boreal forest that is coming increasingly under siege".

At the time, Subcommittee Chair Senator Nicholas Taylor said: "The Subcommittee believes that we can and must develop strategies that can ensure the survival of our threatened boreal forest while still enhancing traditional forest use and preserving economic and industrial benefits." Senator Taylor stressed the urgency of the challenges ahead. "Because there are no quick fixes and many of the actions we must take may have a substantial transition period, the window of opportunity for preserving all of the values offered by the boreal forest is closing rapidly. We must put our words into action very soon indeed."

Four years later, the Canadian Boreal Initiative (CBI) commissioned research to determine whether or not the warning issued by the subcommittee has been heeded<sup>1</sup>. This research focused on those recommendations judged to provide the clearest indicators of progress towards the long-term conservation of the boreal forest region, namely:

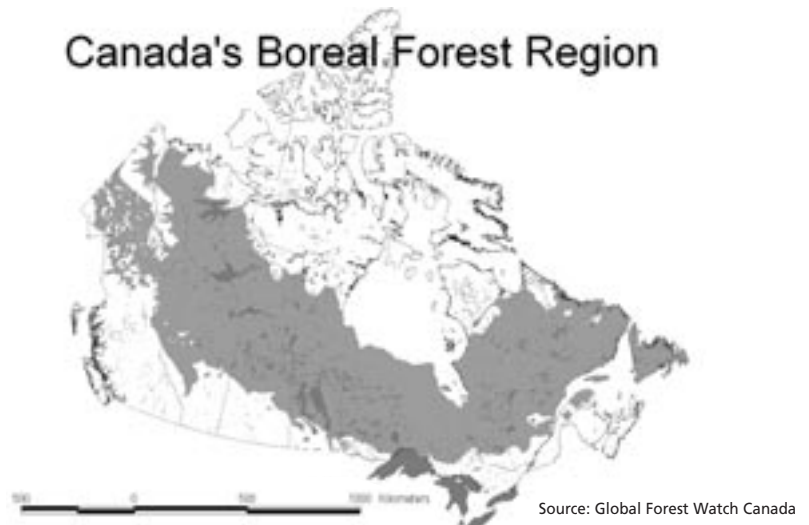
- Comprehensive land-use planning;
- Establishment of parks and protected areas;
- Sustainable industrial development;
- Wildlife and habitat conservation;
- Aboriginal rights and title; and
- Improved data collection and monitoring on the state of the boreal ecosystem.

Since more than 90% of Canada's boreal forest is publicly owned, the research concentrated on those recommendations related specifically to public land. While this report does not address private lands issues directly, the CBI recognizes that progress has been made by both the federal government and several provinces in areas relating to private woodlots in the boreal – most notably by changing tax laws and creating incentives to promote long-term management and planning.

In addition, it should be noted that this review focused primarily on federal action in response to the Senate recommendations. While examples of provincial action are included, this does not constitute a full study of provincial and territorial activity that may have occurred in relation to the Senate committee recommendations.

## ABOUT CANADA'S BOREAL FOREST

One of the world's largest remaining intact forest ecosystems, Canada's boreal forest region covers approximately 50% of the country, stretching like a broad green ribbon from sea to sea across the country. Home to a rich array of wildlife including billions of birds and some of the largest remaining herds of woodland caribou in the world, Canada's boreal is also one of the world's largest sources of fresh water, is a significant air purifier, and helps regulate the climate by storing vast amounts of carbon in its soils and vegetation. The region is also home to more than one million people, including more than 600 First Nations communities.



Canada's boreal is a global treasure. Given that much of the region remains ecologically intact, we still have a unique opportunity to conserve it. However, the pace of development is accelerating: technological advances are rendering previously non-commercial forests viable, and the search for oil, gas, minerals and hydro-electric power is moving further into once-remote territory.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

In relation to the most important areas of the Senate report's recommendations for boreal conservation, this review found the following:

### 1. COMPREHENSIVE LAND-USE PLANNING **NO Progress**

***The Senate committee recommended that governments seriously consider developing a natural landscape-based forest use regime for the boreal forest with conservation of biodiversity as the primary planning objective for up to 80% of the region (including 20% in strict protection).<sup>2</sup>***

This is considered by many observers to be the single most important recommendation made by the Senate committee. Implementing large-scale land use planning in the boreal prior to new industrial development decisions will enable Canada to take a truly proactive approach to conserving biodiversity in the boreal for all time.

However, while individual land use planning exercises affecting portions of the boreal region are underway in different provinces, this review of progress found no specific national response to the recommendation. For example, the *Canada Forest Accord*, released in May of this year by the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers (CCFM) sets out its vision, principles, and commitments. Though the *Accord* states that it is the CCFM's vision to maintain and enhance the long-term health of Canada's forests for all living things, it contains no specific commitments relating to boreal forest ecology or conservation.

The recent *National Forest Strategy, 2003-2008*, from the National Forest Strategy Coalition—which is meant to serve as the road map for sustainable forest policies in Canada—does contain broad objectives concerning integrated land use planning before tenure allocation, and the maintenance of natural forested ecosystems. The commitment concerning integrated land use planning could prove very useful in boreal conservation efforts. However, to date there have been no steps at the national level to develop an ecosystem-wide planning approach to ensure the integrity of the entire region.

The Canadian Council of Forest Ministers is now developing a new initiative for managing Canada's forests called *Forest 2020*. Draft documents related to the initiative indicate that it is focused on intensive silviculture and high-yield tree plantations. While materials state that *Forest 2020* will “contribute to forest ecosystem conservation”<sup>3</sup>, it is not yet clear how this goal is to be accomplished or what, precisely, it would entail.

## 2. PARKS AND PROTECTED AREAS **Some progress**

***The Senate committee recommended that federal and provincial governments complete the network of protected areas originally promised for 2000 by no later than 2002, in order to conserve boreal forest wilderness.***

Parks and protected areas form a core part of any nature conservation effort. Experience on every continent has demonstrated that the establishment of strictly protected areas on a portion of land and marine ecosystems is one essential step in ensuring that the full range and function of biodiversity persist over time. Large protected areas also make a considerable contribution to human and economic health by protecting watersheds, regulating local climates and protecting soils from erosion. They also allow people to experience nature on its own terms, and contribute significantly to local economies.

According to the 2003 *Nature Audit* by World Wildlife Fund Canada, 58 new sites, or 147,000 km<sup>2</sup> of forested lands (boreal, taiga, and aspen parkland) have received protection since 2000. Of special note within the boreal region is the April 2003 announcement by the Deh Cho First Nation and the federal government that 70,000 km<sup>2</sup> of land have been withdrawn for protection in the NWT. In addition, the Quebec government has, in the past year, announced the protection of more than 25,000 non-contiguous km<sup>2</sup> in the boreal.

Despite a 1992 commitment by federal, provincial and territorial governments to complete a protected areas network in Canada by 2000, it remains far from complete. The WWF reports that only 121 out of a total of 537 natural regions (both within and outside of the boreal) are adequately or moderately protected. Partial protection exists for 210 natural regions, leaving 206 natural regions with little or no protection<sup>4</sup>.

***The Senate committee recommended that identification, interim protection and establishment of six new national parks within the boreal forest zone be accelerated.***

There have been no new formal designations of national parks in the boreal since the Senate's report. Feasibility studies and negotiations are underway now for four proposed national park sites in the boreal region, including the Mealy Mountains in Labrador, the Manitoba Lowlands, Wolf Lake in Yukon, and the East Arm of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories, although the latter two are at the very early stages of discussions.



At the same time, the federal government is to be commended for several key announcements related to national parks earlier this year. In addition to committing to advance 10 new national parks (including several in the boreal) over the next few years, the government announced increased funding for national parks this year. The February 2003 budget allocated \$74 million over the next two years towards maintaining existing parks and establishing new national parks and marine areas, and in March 2003, the Minister of Canadian Heritage announced an additional \$145 million in funding for these initiatives.

### 3. INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT **Little progress**

***The Senate committee recommended banning industrial development in actual and proposed national and provincial parks and stated that governments should not issue timber or other development permits in current or proposed parks.***

One of the key challenges in the boreal forest is how to meet sustainable development needs, while maintaining its natural bounty that sustains all forms of life. Governments can make an important start by supporting world-leading sustainable development practices by companies active in the region. It is equally important that where protected areas are set aside for conservation purposes, they are, as the Senate recommended, “truly protected.”

This is an issue on which much more progress must be made. The 2003 *National Forest Strategy* recommends “using integrated land use planning, especially before tenure allocation” as a main objective. This should provide an impetus for federal and provincial governments to introduce consistent policies for protecting candidate park sites.

However, many protected areas face threats from a host of different industrial activities<sup>5</sup>. For example, the Mellon Lake Conservation Reserve in Ontario—a 55km<sup>2</sup> area south of the boreal region—has faced repeated threats from a company seeking to remove gravel and granite from the environmentally sensitive area. Although the Ministry of Natural Resources rejected the company’s application to operate a gravel pit in 2001 and 2002, a new application was submitted again this year and could, under current legislation, be resubmitted in all coming years. Discussions between industry associations, government, and conservation groups have resolved some of the issues concerning industrial development in parks, but new problems such as those threatening Mellon Lake continue to emerge.

The lack of co-ordination between departments at the same level of government, and between different levels of government, is also a major barrier to both proposed and established protected areas. As an example, a 2001 federal government report described the problems resulting from a lack of coordination between levels of government regarding the proposed Mealy Mountains national park<sup>6</sup>. The area proposed for protection represents the largest roadless forested area on the Eastern Seaboard of North America. However, the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador is planning Phase III of the Trans-Labrador Highway—a 250 km road—that would traverse the proposed park. The federal government is therefore in the position of funding a feasibility study for the park while the provincial government is funding an environmental assessment of a highway that would cross it, potentially creating the problems outlined in the following section.



***The Senate committee recommended that maximum road and trail density standards appropriate for the area within the boreal forest be established and enforced.***

Roads, trails and other access routes cause major degradation of the boreal ecosystem. For example, they open areas up to access for mining, oil and gas exploration, hunting, angling, and other human uses, and can serve as access points for invasive species. Further, many species—such as caribou, wolves, marten, and grizzly bears— need large, relatively undisturbed home ranges in order to survive.

Although scientists and non-governmental organizations are focusing increasingly on the hazards presented by roads and fragmentation to ecosystems and particular wildlife species, the 2003 *National Forest Strategy* steps away from this recommendation: while the 1998 *National Forest Strategy* contained a commitment to use the best available knowledge of local ecological conditions as part of the planning for forest roads, the 2003 *National Forest Strategy* contains no similar recommendation.

A recent report by the World Resources Institute shows that only 6% of forests in the contiguous United States can now be considered “low-access”<sup>7</sup>. The only large remaining roadless wilderness areas in North America are in the Canadian and Alaskan boreal ranges, and even within the boreal, approximately 30% of the land is within a kilometre of a road or access route<sup>8</sup>. A recent report by Ontario environmental organizations shows that—as of 1998—there were only 40 roadless areas larger than 200 square kilometres remaining in the half of Ontario that allows forest management<sup>9</sup>. Recent calculations show that the total length of roads in northeastern Alberta will rise from 17,764 km in 2002 to up to 162,000 km by 2050<sup>10</sup>.

Responses to what could be described as an epidemic of roads are patchwork and insufficient. Some important steps have been made by industry itself. For example, in Alberta, the Alberta Chamber of Resources has created an Integrated Landscape Management program to try to consolidate impacts from development. Early indications suggest that this effort could be successful in keeping densities below what they might otherwise have been.

The need for a strong, comprehensive scheme to limit road densities and fragmentation—as opposed to ad hoc arrangements assembled by different land users —has been recognized by the signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). In April 2002, at the sixth meeting of signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Canada agreed to an expanded work program on forest biological diversity that includes the objective of preventing and mitigating losses due to fragmentation<sup>11</sup>. While the federal government has taken no initiatives in this area to date, the CBD requirement, along with the Senate Subcommittee’s clear recommendation, should spur provincial and federal governments to take a more proactive role in response to this issue.

***The Senate committee recognized the important role that voluntary certification can play in encouraging sustainable forest management and recommended that Canada encourage greater integration of certification systems.***

Forest certification represents one important way to encourage sustainable forest management practices by companies operating in the boreal. While governments have not acted on the Senate’s original recommendation (in part because the federal government is not in a position to implement a uniform standard), progress has been made in encouraging certification in Canada.

Industry, represented by the Forest Products Association of Canada (FPAC), has taken a significant lead in promoting certification systems. In 2002, FPAC announced that all of its members would, as a condition of membership, have to be certified to one of three standards by 2006. Certification will have to be made to forest-specific standards set by either the Forest Stewardship Council, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, or the Canadian Standards Association. The requirement imposed by FPAC will result in approximately 90,000 km<sup>2</sup> of forested land in Canada being certified to a forest-specific standard by 2006.

Certain companies such as Tembec, are already demonstrating leadership in this area. Tembec recently achieved Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification for the Gordon Cosens forest near Kapuskasing, based on the draft FSC Ontario standard, making Gordon Cosens the first boreal forest to be certified in North America to a performance-based standard, and the largest FSC-certified forest in Canada<sup>12</sup>. Tembec has also signed a partnership with the World Wildlife Fund-Canada setting a target of seeking FSC certification for 13,000 km<sup>2</sup> of forest managed by the company by 2005.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. WILDLIFE AND HABITAT CONSERVATION **Little progress**

***The Senate committee recommended adoption of a strong Endangered Species Act that also recognizes the importance of preserving the habitat on which endangered species depend for their survival.***

Progress has been made in achieving this recommendation. The federal government passed the *Species at Risk Act* in 2002. In addition to prohibiting killing of endangered species, the *Species at Risk Act* will prohibit the destruction of the critical habitat of a listed species if the species' critical habitat is on federal land, in the exclusive economic zone of Canada, or on the continental shelf of Canada; or if the species is an aquatic species. The prohibition is scheduled to take effect June 1, 2004. For those migratory bird species protected by the *Migratory Birds Convention Act*, critical habitat is only protected if the habitat is on federal lands or in a migratory bird sanctuary designated under the *Act*.

Because habitat protection is discretionary under the *Act* on provincial lands (which include most of the boreal), and wildlife is not restricted by human-defined boundaries, it will be critical that the *Act* be supported by action at the provincial and territorial level to develop coordinated and effective habitat protection programs to ensure the conservation of threatened and endangered species.

***Because of the vital role they play in preserving biodiversity, the Senate recommended that cutting should be limited in old-growth sections of the boreal forest.***

Old-growth forests are ecologically unique, and many boreal species—such as woodland caribou, grizzly bear, and flying squirrel—depend on old-growth for their survival. However, no specific measures to preserve boreal old growth have been introduced to date.

While the 2003 *National Forest Strategy* states that conserving old-growth forests is an objective, the Strategy does not contain any corresponding "action items" on this point. Further, there is no reference to primary or old-growth forest preservation in the 2003 *National Forest Accord*. To the contrary, the 2003 *National Forest Strategy* recommends expanding the area and use of community-based tenure systems and resource allocation models into remote, rural regions of Canada—a recommendation which, uncoupled with any corresponding item on protecting old-growth, could readily be seen as an incentive to log in mature areas.

With the majority of cutting in the boreal taking place in mature or “over-mature” forests that have never before been cut<sup>14</sup>, it is critical that this recommendation be addressed by governments as a priority.

## 5. RECOGNITION OF ABORIGINAL RIGHTS **Little progress**

***The Senate made a series of recommendations concerning the duty of governments to honour their obligations regarding lands and Aboriginal peoples.***

First Nations peoples are the primary inhabitants of the boreal forest region. An estimated one million people live in more than 600 First Nations communities across boreal Canada. Many rely on traditional use of the land for their livelihood.

Recognition of Aboriginal rights is an objective of the 2003 *National Forest Strategy* as it was in the 1998 strategy. However, a report issued two years after the 1998 *Strategy* came into effect found that: comprehensive data was not available to determine the number of Aboriginal people employed in Canada’s forest sector; the data collection that did take place occurred only on an ad hoc basis; forest management plans for 286 First Nations communities did not recognize important social, cultural or spiritual sites; fewer than half of those plans recognized the social or spiritual value of the land under management; and there was insufficient data available on the amount of forest available for subsistence uses<sup>15</sup>.

In addition, the 2001 *Mid-Term Evaluation* of the 1998 Forest Strategy—a report prepared by an independent expert evaluation panel to assess progress made under the 1998 commitments—found that, except for the Northwest Territories and Saskatchewan, federal and provincial governments were failing to include Aboriginal people in the planning and management of forests. The *Evaluation* described the progress that had been made as “localized and limited”<sup>16</sup>.

***The Senate recommended support for increased Aboriginal representation in the forest industry.***

Some progress has been made in involving Aboriginal peoples in the forest sector. For example, the federal government and some provinces, such as Ontario, have made efforts to promote Aboriginal participation in the area of employment. The National Aboriginal Forestry Association estimates that approximately 15,000 Aboriginal people in Canada are employed in the forest industry. In March 2003, the federal government announced increased and extended funding for the First Nations Forestry Program, committing \$6.5 million per year until 2008.

## 6. DATA COLLECTION **Some progress**

***The Senate made a series of recommendations aimed at improving data collection in the boreal forest region, such as funding for a comprehensive nation-wide forest inventory, including forest soils and soil organisms.***

In order to plan for the conservation of Canada’s boreal forest region, it is vitally important to understand the extent and functioning of its wildlife and natural vegetation, and its role in balancing the global ecosystem. The Senate committee identified the lack of data on the boreal region as a serious shortcoming in

developing its recommendations. At present, there is still no readily available, standardized data on basic forest cover and age structure at the national level. There have been some efforts by governments to improve data collection in the boreal region, but far more work is needed to monitor the region's wildlife, water and vegetation patterns, and to assess their value.

Examples of efforts to improve data collection include the "Canadian Information System for the Environment" (CISE). This federal program is intended to improve environmental management decisions nationally by increasing the collection, management and assessment of environmental information. In addition, the federal government initiated the Canadian Forest Ecosystem Classification program in 1998 in conjunction with partners from provincial and territorial governments. The goal is to develop a nationally standardized set of definitions and descriptions for forest communities with linkages to the International Classification of Ecological Communities<sup>17</sup>.

In 1999 the federal government released a new "plot-based" national forest inventory design intended to make comparable data across the country available on forest attributes. However it will not collect data on soils and soil organisms, and this data is essential for monitoring the regenerative capacity of boreal forests. Failure to include soil and soil organisms in the list of attributes requiring study is counter to the Subcommittee Recommendation, and also counter to the findings of *National Status 2000*, which stated that the long-term productivity and resilience of a forest are dependent upon soils, and that provincial agencies were failing to gather data on land protected specifically for soil conservation<sup>18</sup>.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some progress has been made to promote conservation of the boreal forest region since the Senate report was tabled in 1999. Governments have made efforts to extend the range of parks and protected areas in the boreal region, and to improve data collection. The forestry industry has moved forward on promoting certification of sustainable forestry practices.

However, overall, governments have made little progress in meeting many of the Subcommittee's recommendations. Of most serious concern is that governments have taken little action in response to the Senate Subcommittee's main recommendation of creating a land-use planning process that would set the conservation of natural ecosystems as the priority in 80% of the boreal region. It is also a strong concern that little progress has been made addressing the committee's recommendations related to Aboriginal peoples.

While it is not too late to move on the Senate report's recommendations, the fate of Canada's boreal region will be determined by default if governments do not act now. In the absence of coordinated conservation planning, development discussions taking place now in virtually every province and territory will largely determine the fate of the boreal region over the next three to five years.

Governments should take a much more proactive role in developing land-use planning goals before granting further development permits on a piece-meal basis by working in cooperation with their counterparts, and with other major boreal stakeholders including First Nations, conservation groups, industry and local communities.

As immediate steps, the federal, provincial and territorial governments should:

1. Adopt and implement **large-scale land use planning** for Canada's boreal region that establishes clear goals for conservation of wildlife, vegetation and fresh water, as well as standards for sustainable development.
2. Complete the network of **protected areas and national parks** across the country and stop issuing development permits in areas slated for protection.
3. **Strengthen the involvement of First Nations in land use planning and forest management** that respect their long-term relationship with the land as well as treaties and rights guaranteed to them under the Canadian Constitution.
4. Increase **data collection and monitoring** of wildlife species and natural attributes of the boreal region including land, vegetation and water using consistent standards, and make all data readily available to the public.

These actions, if implemented, will make a significant contribution to ensuring the long-term ecological integrity of this unique global resource.

## END NOTES

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