

# Mersey could change this province forever

November 22, 2012 - 4:16am By GEOFF LE BOUTILLIER

A decision on the Mersey lands is clearly imminent. When the premier says, "... we are sick and tired of watching the future of Nova Scotia being sold off to foreign interests," you know something is up. It's music to the ears of the hard-working Buy Back the Mersey volunteers. Their dream could soon become reality — publicly owned, the three Mersey districts could catalyze a new way of practising forestry in this province.

The Buy Back the Mersey alliance, a growing list of 66 organizations including municipalities, NGOs, industry and professional associations, and hundreds of individual Nova Scotians, supports the community forest model, ways for communities to collectively manage their own forests. Profits flow back to the communities, not to distant shareholders with no personal stake.

By buying back the three districts, a total of 550,000 acres or four per cent of the province, the Mersey lands could be a proving ground for improved forest practices: low-impact forestry, mixed species, uneven growth, a healthy canopy, connectivity and biodiversity, R&D, specialty products, niche markets, co-operative marketing, etc. Community forests on the Mersey lands would help rekindle the province's beleaguered rural economy.

Each of the three districts is unique. This is what we would be buying:

The Medway District, the largest, is already FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified, meaning it is managed responsibly. A premium is paid for FSC wood. Its forests have the greatest immediate market potential. Its surrounding towns have an active forestry sector. Its network of logging roads is relatively sparse, and pockets of old forests remain. Part of the Southwest Nova Biosphere, just down the road is Kejimkujik, the Tobeatic Wilderness and the dynamic, non-profit Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute, providing leadership in sustainable natural resource use and biodiversity.

The Rossignol District, the second largest of the three, is discontinuous, comprised of many smaller holdings. Its spine, the Mersey River, links it to Brooklyn on the coast, home of the shuttered Bowater-Mersey mill. The lower Mersey is a rich archeological resource — containing Mi'kmaq artifacts thousands of years old. At its heart is the province's largest fresh-water lake, Rossignol, created by the paper company to generate power for its plant. The company's cogeneration (heat and electricity) biomass plant needs fibre from surrounding mills, which depend on that revenue and on the forest itself, part of an intricate supply chain which needs a paradigm shift to address current realities.

The oldest district, the 100,000-acre St. Margaret's District, also is steeped in history. It's said the British navy was built from its wood. Other features: the Old Annapolis Hiking Trail; 6,000-year-old Mi'kmaq artifacts; its vast network of forest roads, giving access for multiple uses to most of the district. On the east side, flowing south, is one of the province's first hydroelectric systems; and to its west, Panuke Lake, the province's longest, flowing north, part of Minas Basin

Pulp and Power's hydro system. At the lake's south end is Indian Hill, from which flow three of the district's six great river systems — one southwest to Mahone Bay, another southeast to St. Margaret's Bay, and the third north to the Bay of Fundy. Indian Hill is a key connectivity point linking the province's east and west. Much of the district lies in HRM. Designated resource land, it forms the western flank of the municipality's greenbelt. Heavily harvested for generations, by traditional standards the forests have been managed relatively well, an economic mainstay for 150 years for surrounding communities in Hants, Lunenburg and Halifax counties.

Based on the unique profiles of each district, and balancing the needs of environmental protection, responsible and profitable forestry and other commercial potential, history and recreation, draft management plans for each district are being devised. The plans are built on certain common principles, including:

The lands must be placed in the public domain.

The lands must be managed by, with and for Nova Scotian communities.

Forestry on the lands must be FSC certified

Full cost accounting must be used in decision making.

The coalition is extremely pleased with current developments and hopes all Nova Scotians, regardless of political stripe, join in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to use the Mersey lands to kick-start a better, greener province.

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