

Pulp mill seeks more Crown land

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Northern in talks with province about company's need for access to fibre



Don Breen, general manager of Northern Pulp, says the Pictou County pulp plant is in negotiations with the province for more Crown land. (AARON BESWICK / Truro Bureau / File)

Northern Pulp Nova Scotia Corp. is in talks with the provincial government for more Crown land.

The Pictou County pulp mill says it needs access to more of the province's forests in order to be cost-competitive and sustainable over the long term.

"If you look at our costs for making pulp, 50 per cent is fibre, and that is a high amount," Northern Pulp general manager Don Breen said Friday. "Whenever we have the opportunity to secure more fibre, that is something we want to do."

Natural Resources Minister Zach Churchill said the pulp mill has approached the government with "a couple of requests."

"I can't get into the details of those at this point because we haven't communicated any decisions back to Northern (Pulp)."

However, Churchill noted that the Abercrombie Point operation is facing some challenges.

“There is a real need for secure access to fibre supply,” he said. “The easiest way for those companies to get that is through the province.”

The Natural Resources Department is putting together a management plan for Crown land in western Nova Scotia, including the 220,000 hectares of forest land purchased from **Bowater Mersey Ltd.** for \$117.7 million.

“We’re in the process of completing our management plan for that area, and there will be some allotments given to various companies to harvest fibre off Crown land,” Churchill said.

But a large swath of that land, known as the St. Margarets block, has some nearby residents worried about the government’s plans.

During extensive public consultations, a number of groups expressed their desire for the wooded area to be used for community forest development, recreation, culture and heritage, and biodiversity.

However, the draft version of the western Nova Scotia Crown land management plan refers to the St. Margarets block, which is the furthest east and closest to Halifax Regional Municipality, as only having forestry, mineral and Mi’kmaq value.

Given that it’s the block closest to the Northern Pulp mill, residents are concerned the government has set it aside for the facility.

“The public supported the previous government’s purchase of the Bowater land to prevent a foreign multinational from coming along, snapping it up and then clearcutting it,” said Raymond Plourde, wilderness co-ordinator for the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax.

“It would be a terrible irony if a foreign multinational was now given it after we paid for the land.”

Geoff LeBoutillier, founder of the St. Margarets Bay Stewardship Association, said the St. Margarets block is widely used for hunting, fishing, hiking, canoeing and other recreational activities.

He also said there are a number of local mills interested in accessing the wooded area for smaller-scale forestry activities.

“The Buy Back the Mersey movement began in St. Margarets Bay ... and everybody had the expectation we’d be able to play a part in the management of this resource. But it appears the province has ignored the public consultations.

“Instead, we’re in the crosshairs of Northern Pulp. If you draw a line from Abercrombie Point to the western Crown land area, this is the closest and cheapest place for them to truck fibre from.”

Churchill said the plan for Crown land should be finalized in the coming weeks and will be “reflective of the extensive consultations that took place with the public.”

Meanwhile, Breen dismissed the suggestion that Northern Pulp is also seeking financial assistance from the province.

“The only formal ask we have is the Crown allocation,” he said, adding that “we’re always in discussions about different things.”

Churchill said any request made to government would be “evaluated on its merits,” but the government would be keeping its commitment to Nova Scotians.

“We were very critical of the previous government’s reactionary measures when it came to corporate bailouts. We made a commitment to Nova Scotians that we would take a different approach to economic development.”

About the Author

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