

What's the best use for Bowater's lands?

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Premier Darrell Dexter is shown unveiling what land was included in a \$23.7 million purchase from Bowater back in March. With the demise of the mill, the province is now being urged to buy more of the company's land holdings in Nova Scotia. (BEVERLEY WARE / South Shore Bureau)

The forest industry in Nova Scotia is going through a difficult transition. With the closure of the Bowater mill and the struggle to restart the mill at Port Hawkesbury, many Nova Scotians find themselves in a very hard position, particularly mill workers, private woodlot owners, and local contractors.

It's clear that the current model of forestry in Nova Scotia is not working and, if there is to be any long-term future for the industry here, it must shift to a model that's more sustainable, more focused on value-added forest products, and relies more upon the skills of local communities and small businesses.

Using Acadian forests to make newsprint and tissue paper, or worse, burning the forest biomass for electricity, is not the best use of this resource. It's not sustainable and it doesn't maximize the value of the natural resource. It's also extremely vulnerable to global market pressures and the overall downsizing that's occurring at the international scale. The Acadian forest is capable of growing large trees that can produce excellent value-added products, so why not choose a path that focuses more on the quality of the wood products instead of the quantity of wood supply?

With the impacts of the global changes to the pulp and paper industry now reaching Nova Scotia in a very real way, the province is faced with a very important decision about what happens to Bowater's private land holdings. At over a half million acres in six counties, Bowater is the largest landowner in Nova Scotia and with the company pulling up shop and leaving the province, all of these lands are now for sale.

Many people are wondering what will happen to the Bowater land holdings and are trying to figure out how to turn this crisis into a longer-term opportunity. Is it possible to shift the industry to something that's more sustainable, more focused on the local community, and less vulnerable to corporate decisions made in far away executive offices.

For many, the worst-case scenario would be a fly-by-night operation swooping in and snapping up the Bowater lands, flipping the best lands for development and liquidating the remainder with little benefit for local communities and devastating impacts on the environment. This trend is happening in Northeastern United States and is starting to move across the border into the Maritimes.

When large forest companies close up shop and move out, other companies move in to pick up the scraps. And, where the original company may have been managing the forests using sustainable harvesting rotations, the new companies often look more at short-term returns on their investment and start liquidating the assets and move on. That means lots of clearcuts and lots of raw product being shipped out and very few jobs being created.

Under this scenario, in only a few short years, not only could there still not be a viable forest industry in southwestern Nova Scotia, but there could also be a vastly depleted natural resource. This will make it that much harder to turn the corner and shift the industry toward something that's more sustainable and more focused on value-added products.

This worst-case scenario must be avoided, which is why the Nova Scotia government needs to step in and acquire all of the Bowater lands that are for sale. The government has surprisingly little control over preventing the liquidation of this forest resource by other means.

By acquiring all of the Bowater lands that are currently for sale, the province has the ability to protect the most ecologically-significant ecosystems and lease out the remainder for local forestry interests. This is even more significant, particularly because Nova Scotia has so little public land already. Only about 30 per cent of Nova Scotia is publicly-owned, one of the lowest percentages across the country. We need to be expanding our public land base and creating opportunities for local forestry operations.

Earlier this year, the Nova Scotia government acquired 10,000 hectares of land from Bowater. This was a smart investment. Rather than handing the company a cash bailout, the province instead acquired an equal value of land and this includes some of the best real estate owned by the company. All of the properties that were purchased are high conservation value lands and much of it contains old-growth Acadian forest and species-at-risk habitat, as well as significant frontage on lakes and waterways. Without these ecologically-significant lands being acquired, all

would be for sale right now, and all of these prized natural areas would be threatened. Fortunately, these lands are now in public ownership.

Letting the remainder of the Bowater lands fall into the hands of a big company that promises jobs but liquidates the resource instead would be a travesty. The Nova Scotia government should seize the opportunity to acquire all of the Bowater lands now, while we still have an opportunity to define the future of the forest industry in southwestern Nova Scotia. It's time to think bigger, prepare a strategy for the long term, and trust smaller companies to get the job done.

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