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A Closer Look at Maine's Forest: Mainewatch Institute Conference Explores Sustainable Forestry Practice and Policy

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Commentary
A Closer Look at Maine's Forest
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by Christopher "Kit" St. John

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The forest "compact," developed as an alternative to the "Ban Clearcutting" initiative defeated by Maine voters at referendum last year, is back on the ballot this November. For the 77 percent of the electorate who through their votes supported some change in forest practices, the question now is whether enacting the compact advances forest practices sufficiently, or creates more damage than good.

Armed with the knowledge that forest products contribute about 18 percent of the gross state product, participants at the Mainewatch Institute Conference on Sustainable Forestry—held last April at the University of Maine—considered that question from several perspectives.

An effort to define sustainable forestry was offered by the conference's keynote speaker, Dr. Jerry Franklin of the University of Washington. Franklin led a collaborative effort to develop new management standards for the national forests of the Pacific Northwest, and is the "forest steward" for a large, privately held industrial forest in Tierra del Fuego, Chile.

Franklin said an ecologist's definition of sustainability starts with maintaining the potential of an area's land and water systems to produce the same quality and quantity of goods and services in perpetuity. This requires maintaining the physical and biological requirements of productivity, as well as thinking beyond a mechanistic assessment of chemical elements such as nitrogen to the recognition that many "lesser" organisms such as fungi and insects do a lot of work in an ecosystem and are very vulnerable. Thus, the sustainability plan for the Northwest forests placed a central importance on maintaining biodiversity, particularly the mature forest habitats that such biota (not just the "poster species" such as wolves or spotted owl) require.

Franklin also said social and political definitions of a community's values need to be preserved in the forest, and a balance of the ecological, social, and landowner needs will be an inevitable and necessary part of defining sustainability in a practical way.

The Maine Council on Forest Sustainability was appointed by Governor Angus S. King a few months after his election to develop criteria, goals, and benchmarks of sustainable forestry for the state. The chair of the council, Professor Robert Seymour of the University of Maine, spoke during the conference of his frustrations with the council's experience. He said the council was

able to develop the criteria, goals, and benchmarks on schedule by July 1996, but that effort was overtaken by the negotiations that produced the compact before the council could complete its final task of recommending changes in the Maine Forest Practices Act that would implement the definitions of sustainability developed by the council. Others also noted the council's frustrations, but said its definitions of sustainability were incorporated by explicit reference as the beginning of the proposed audit process included in the compact legislation.

Robert Bryan of the Maine Audubon Society listed twenty-eight areas to be considered in any program to preserve forest habitat and biodiversity. Of these areas (such as contiguous forest blocks, stand size and shape, tree size and age), only eleven currently receive any regulatory attention, and many of those regulations are judged inadequate to genuinely protect the affected value.

Janet McMahon of the Maine chapter of the Nature Conservancy described "a vision of a forest that looks and functions like a forest (multistoried, undisturbed soil layer, intact ground vegetation), a forest that retains a sense of wildness, and a forest that looks well-cared for." She said U.S. Forest Service inventories support a view that Maine forests are not all being managed in a way to sustain these values. She said more must be done, and that the compact is a minimum that may meet industry's objectives but will not maximize the forest's potential.

Lloyd Irland, former state economist and a consultant to forest industry clients, presented a "Star Wars exercise in futuring" that explored what the Maine forest landscape might look like in fifty years under three scenarios: totally unfettered industrial forestry, modest or no policy changes, and the "jungle planet," an extreme conservation approach.

Even under an extreme approach that would require more than doubling the amount of currently reserved land free of any cutting, Irland said the clear-cuts of the last twenty years would become even-aged stands of fifty to seventy years-ripe for insect infestation and a long way from true old growth. While the unfettered intensive management scenario would leave a desert landscape, a reasonable forecast using present policies only modestly changed suggests a steadily declining forest age, extensive fragmentation of habitat, significant changes of habitat and "shadow conversions" of forest land, a decline in public access to the remaining forest, and scarce debris left behind to rebuild the forest's biological base.

Irland concluded that recent levels of forest cutting have tested the limits of natural growth and must be prevented from increasing, so we must consider how to cap the cut. Under any plausible scenario he suggested a severe shortage of fiber is likely to develop, not just in Maine but worldwide. He said there is a major win-win opportunity to modify current practices in order to increase conservation while using increased yields from areas of more intensive management to balance the reduced yields required in many areas to attain sustainable forests.

Many speakers addressed the process of certification as, in the words of one, "the shiny new tool in achieving a more sustainable forest, which will lose its luster as it matures." While the tendency of American and world consumers to seek the least expensive option was acknowledged, large buyers' groups are beginning to demand wood products from forests "certified" by independent third parties as being managed in a sustainable way. This market

power is expected to have an increasingly important effect on forest management. It is unclear whether the increase of interest in certification will translate into a narrow niche of premium products—like organic foods in supermarket chains—or if wood-product certification might become almost mandatory for main-line suppliers to most markets.

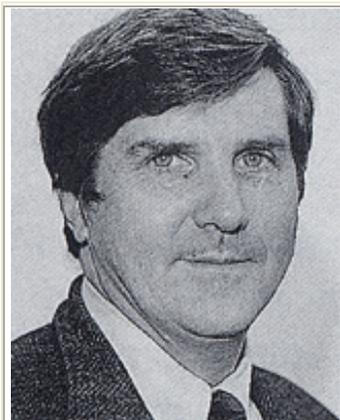
Governor King skillfully explained his desire to leave the forests in better shape at the end of his term, and how he had become convinced the compact was a positive step. He argued that while the compact won't ban clear-cuts, it establishes significant new limits, and that any clear-cut will require justification by a forester as being sound on silvicultural principles.

The governor described the audit program as the "crown jewel" of the compact. Under these provisions, the major landowners (of 60 percent of Maine forests) have agreed to submit to a voluntary audit of their practices, using criteria to be developed by an audit board named under the legislation. That board will start with the benchmarks of sustainability already developed by the Council on Forest Sustainability.

Several speakers suggested the compact would represent a beginning, not an end, of needed change in forest practices. The compact itself calls for further action by the Legislature to control "liquidation harvesting," which escapes clear-cutting restrictions. The compact also envisions a major new acquisition of public lands through a bond issue the Legislature and voters must approve.

Though the conference was not intended to create a consensus, several conclusions seemed inescapable:

Maine's forests are not managed as well as they need to be in the future. • Present regulations do not ensure that needed improvements will be made in a timely fashion. • The compact is not perfect nor complete, but the failure to take at least that step would set back the cooperation needed for ultimate change in the forest. • The drive to complete needed changes will require the continued engagement of an informed and concerned electorate.



Christopher "Kit" St. John serves as executive director of the Maine Center for Economic Policy, a small, nonprofit research organization that addresses Maine state tax and budget issues.

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