

Presentation to Law Amendments Committee:

Bill 57 - Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act, Nov.1, 2021

I am speaking on behalf of the Annapolis County chapter of Extinction Rebellion. First, thank you for having me. Opportunities for citizens to participate directly in the shaping of legislation are important. I hope this government will take seriously the efforts citizens put into their presentations to this committee.

There is much that is good in Bill 57 and it is a great improvement over the previous government's Sustainable Development and Goals Act, in particular because it establishes timelines within the legislation. Unfortunately, those timelines still do not match the urgency of our situation. We are facing twin emergencies vastly more deadly than COVID.

We need the government to tell the truth about the severity of the nature and climate crises, and about what has to be done. And we need the government to act now. We need clear mandates with timelines that are based on science. What we do – or don't do – to cut emissions in the next nine years will determine whether climate chaos and ecosystem collapse become the reality for all future generations. They are already impacting us.

I'll leave the detailed critique of most of this bill to people who know far more about the specifics of emissions reductions. I want to talk about something crucially important that is missing from this bill: adequate attention to the biodiversity crisis.

In June 2021, the world's leading biodiversity and climate experts, convened by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, produced a peer-reviewed report for the world's political leaders. (Search IPBES-IPCC Co-Sponsored Workshop Report.)

The report leaves no doubt that the climate crisis cannot be solved without solving the nature crisis and vice versa.

It identifies actions to simultaneously fight both crises, including expanding nature reserves and restoring – or halting the loss of – ecosystems rich in species and carbon, such as forests, natural grasslands and kelp forests.

The only way Bill 57 addresses the biodiversity crisis is by mandating the protection of 20% of our land and water by 2030. This is a definite improvement over previous goals but I would urge that we need an earlier target of 2025. This will not be easy to achieve but it is essential. Our federal government has agreed to implement the UN's goal of protecting 30% of lands and waters on earth by 2030.

Here in Nova Scotia we should get cracking on our 20% target. First on the to do list: restore Owls Head, with its globally rare ecosystem, to the list of proposed Parks and Protected Areas then immediately protect all the areas on the PPA list.

Bill 57 should include an explicit commitment by the provincial government to obey its own Endangered Species Act. This provision should not be necessary, of course, but when successive governments have failed – for 17 years -- to identify core habitat for listed species, as required by law, and when governments still appear to be ignoring the Nova Scotia Supreme Court's finding of a 'chronic and systemic failure' to follow the law, it is necessary to spell it out.

In light of the continued failure to identify core habitat for Mainland moose, all the areas of Crown land identified in 2012 as Mainland Moose Concentration Areas should be granted temporary protection immediately. All logging and road building operations in these areas should be halted until core moose habitat areas have been identified. These core areas should then be granted immediate, permanent protection.

To return now to the necessity of addressing the nature and climate crises together: one consequence of treating them in isolation is that you get governments signing on to incredibly damaging practices such as burning biomass to generate supposedly green energy.

Burning trees to generate electricity encourages overharvesting. It is fiction to claim the biomass plants running right now in Liverpool and Port Hawksbury run on sawmill waste. There aren't enough good sawlogs left to generate that volume of waste. Instead, supplying these plants and selling woodchips overseas supports the low value, high volume model of forestry that has devastated our forests, damaging whole ecosystems in ways that may be irreparable, given our poor acidic soils and the increasing stresses brought by climate change. To add insult to injury, the electricity generated by burning biomass is dirtier than coal. It is essential that this bill remove biomass from the list of renewable energy sources.

These are not the only ways that Bill 57 fails to address the biodiversity crisis as it is intertwined with the climate crisis. Most shocking of all is the failure to implement immediately the long promised move from clearcutting to ecological forestry on our public lands. This transition has been called for by the public and by scientists for over ten years. Three years ago Mr. Lahey released his recommendations for how to manage this transition while allowing the forestry industry some of what it wanted. The government of the time accepted all his recommendations, as indeed this government has claimed to. This summer, the crucial Silvicultural Guides for the Ecological Matrix (SGEM) were completed. But now, instead of actually implementing the Lahey report, the Bill proposes to delay the transition by another two years.

At the pace of clearcutting that has been allowed – no, encouraged – by one provincial government after another, in two more years the few remaining mixed species, mixed age Wabanaki forests on Crown land will be gone. There will be hardly a shred of forest older than 60 years left standing. In case you think I am exaggerating, between 1958 and 2003, according to forest inventories, the proportion of forest in Nova Scotia aged more than 61 years fell from 59% to 13.5%. By 1995 less than 3% of the forest was older than 80 years. As for actual old growth forests, forests over 120 years, we are down to 0.15%. There is frighteningly little left. When I first started going out to identify proposed cut blocks, I found it difficult to be sure I had the right spots. Now, in my part of the province, I drive down a logging road surrounded by young, short trees. When I see a stand of taller trees in the distance, I know that will be the block. Everything else has been cut already.

This massive habitat loss directly contributes to dramatic declines in wildlife populations. In North America we have lost a billion birds since 1970. Older forests support far more biodiversity than young forests. They also store far more carbon. In these forests, as much carbon is stored in the soil of the forest floor as in all the trunks and branches above ground. Forests like these are the best carbon capture technology we have. They are the most affordable and they work. Until you cut them down.

Once a forest is clearcut, you lose the carbon capturing efforts of all the trees in that forest. The young forest that will regrow -- climate change and soil degradation permitting -- will not sequester any significant carbon for forty years. Not until 2060, in other words. Too late. But it gets worse. Not only do you lose the trees storing carbon when you clearcut; once the forest is all gone, the exposed soil releases the carbon it has been storing. Over a decade or so it releases as much carbon again as the trees above ground were storing. This is part of how Canada's industrially logged boreal forests have become net-carbon emitters. They are now part of the problem.

Ecological forestry avoids this ugly consequence. It does not take too much at one time, and it does not come back for more before the forest is ready. By never taking more than 30% of the forest, so retaining at least 70% of the canopy, the forest lives on. Except in small patches that mimic natural disturbance, the soil is never exposed to drying sun and winds. The different layers of vegetation go on growing. Habitat for wildlife is preserved. The fungal networks of communication and cooperation live on in the soil, promoting the health of the forest. In this way we can have our forests and everything they offer, ecologically, economically, socially, spiritually, while still harvesting some timber.

The necessary tool is in place to transition from the devastation of clearcutting to this sustainable version. And yet this bill wants to delay the transition by two more years. Two more years in which clearcutting would proceed apace, to judge by the plans that have been moving through the province's Harvest Plan Map Viewer in the two months since Tim Houston took office. In these 2 months, 4211 acres have come up for comment. 91% of those harvest plans are for clearcuts, by the government's own definition.

This has to stop. Those prescriptions are generated using the interim Forest Management Guide. The new SGEMs are ready to use. They are far from perfect but the prescriptions they generate will finally move us from clearcutting to ecological forestry. There is no excuse for refusing to use them. If they are not put to use right away then we need an immediate moratorium on further clearcutting of crown land until they are.

In light of the rapidly worsening crises we face, our standing forests have become even more valuable than when Mr. Lahey wrote his report. The value of the ecosystem services and carbon storage capacity live forests provide now far outweighs their value as 'forest products.' In light of this, landscape level planning will be needed to assess whether any forested lands will be available for 'High Production Forestry.' Certainly only areas that have already been turned into industrial plantations -- ecological deserts, in other words -- can be considered.

Protecting and restoring ecosystem health is the overarching priority in the forestry transition Mr. Lahey recommends. We must start reversing the damage done by outmoded forestry practices right now. We certainly cannot afford two more years of ‘talk and log.’

In every direction we look, it is time to act. We know what we have to do. Slash emissions. Stop destroying nature. Respect Indigenous rights. Look after each other and our non-human kin as we make the transition. Let’s do it. Bill 57 is a start but it needs to address the nature crisis as well as climate change.

Nina Newington
Extinction Rebellion Annapolis County