

Protecting A Northern Boreal Region One-And-A-Half Times The Size Of The Maritimes - July 14, 2008

Ontario Fights Climate Change By Protecting Carbon-Absorbing Forests

Ontario's Far North Boreal Forest is one of the last, great, undeveloped spaces on the planet and a vital carbon sink. The forests and peat lands in the Far North store about 97 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide and absorb around 12.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year.

It is also one of the world's largest intact ecosystems. The Northern Boreal region contains more than 200 sensitive species of animals — including polar bears, wolverines and caribou — as well as many species of migratory birds.

Although it is 43 per cent of Ontario's landmass, the region is home to just 24,000 people living in 36 communities. Most of these people are First Nations, living in remote communities far beyond the end of Ontario's road and infrastructure network.

The Far North Boreal Forest has remained virtually undisturbed by humans since the glaciers retreated. But as pressure for new resources and new places to live increases, that will likely change. We need to take this opportunity to guide and plan for that development. It is our responsibility as global citizens.

We will only get one chance to get this right.

That's why the Ontario government is launching a Far North Planning Process —bringing together various experts and groups to create a plan for the Northern Boreal Forest.

What is Being Protected?

Scientists have said that in order to preserve a healthy ecosystem in the Far North, a minimum of half of the land be protected while allowing carefully managed sustainable development in remaining lands.

The Ontario government will be protecting more than 225,000 square kms — or more than half of the Northern Boreal lands — in an interconnected network of conservation lands. Priority will be given to protect lands with key ecological features such as habitat for endangered species or important carbon sinks. These lands will be permanently protected through the Far North planning process. Activity on these lands will be restricted to tourism and traditional Aboriginal uses.

Preserving these lands also protects the core cultural connection of the Aboriginal people who live there — their connection to the land, clean water and abundant hunting and fishing.

How Will The Plan Be Developed?

Our goal is to strike the right balance between conservation and development.

Later this year, we'll engage with First Nation and Métis communities, northerners, the resource sector and scientists to create a broad framework for our plan, which will be completed by the spring of 2009.

At the same time, we will also work with individual Aboriginal communities to begin a local land-use planning process.

Each year, a number of communities will complete these local plans. To ensure proper planning and community input, new forestry and the opening of new mines in the Far North would require community land use plans supported by local Aboriginal communities.

To support this planning, the Ontario Government is undertaking scientific mapping of the region's biodiversity, carbon sequestration potential, Aboriginal cultural heritage and mineral and natural resource potential.

The entire process will be completed in the next 10-15 years.

A New Role For First Nations In The Far North

This planning process for the Far North will enshrine a new respect and working relationship with First Nations. In addition to a much greater say on the future of their communities and traditional lands, the process also creates opportunities for economic development in these remote communities.

Planning at the community level will be a true partnership. Because any decision on development has the greatest affect on communities, local planning will only be done in agreement with First Nations.

Resource Benefits Sharing

We will create a new system of Resource Benefits Sharing and we will consult with Aboriginal communities immediately on ways to provide greater economic benefit to Aboriginal communities from resource development. This fall, we will provide details on a down payment to be made by the Ontario government towards Resource Benefits Sharing.

Reforming And Modernizing Ontario's Mining Act

Our plan will ensure that mining potential across the province is developed in a sustainable way that benefits and respects communities.

We will ensure that our mining industry remains strong — but we also need to modernize the way mining companies stake and explore their claims to be more respectful of private land owners and Aboriginal communities. The Ontario government believes exploration and mine development should only take place following early consultation and accommodation of Aboriginal communities.

To ensure that mining practices are up to date in the far North and across the province, we will review the Mining Act.

Consultations will begin early next month. We will introduce legislation in the upcoming session and new rules would be in place for later next year.