

## Is it time to change the way we manage the forests in Ontario's North?

By Jessica Smith, Atikokan Progress

March 17, 2008

An increasingly common scenario in northern communities is one where a mill shuts down, and residents eventually see local timber being trucked out to other mills. This scene, which is being played out across the North, may explain the "surprising" level of support the Northern Ontario Sustainable Communities Partnership (NOSCP) has seen for its forestry charter, which calls for communities - not mills - to control local forests.

"I probably shouldn't be surprised, but support is much higher than we expected," said Lakehead University's Dr. Peggy Smith (an assistant professor in the faculty of forestry and the forest environment), who along with Laurentian University Economics department head Dr. David Robinson, drafted the charter. It was released last August, and has been endorsed by communities and organizations across the province (Atikokan is not among them).

"One of the concerns now is that we don't want to lose this momentum because we think the idea around community forestry is building and people are willing to explore the idea some more, which is why we want to have a spring conference. The charter has generated a lot of discussion and a lot of people are wondering what it means and how it could be put into practice. We think the next stage is to have a wider discussion with a broader range of people, looking at some of those charter principles and seeing how they might be applied in northern Ontario."

Currently the NOSCP, a volunteer, ad-hoc committee that formed in 2006, is seeking funding from its supporters for such a conference, likely to be held in Thunder Bay.

The charter outlines several forms of community forestry management, where boards are comprised of reps from municipalities, economic development, workers and unions, recreational groups, environmental agencies, forest industry and First Nations would operate under the MNR to manage wood allocation.

Smith said wood allocation is one of the key issues currently facing the forest industry. "Historically, we have tied wood supply to our mills. You don't get wood supply unless you have a processing facility and our processing facilities historically have been high-volume, low-quality products like pulp and paper and dimensional lumber, and we have become dependent on that sector, on commodity production. It is a high capital sector, because it takes millions and millions to build a pulp and paper mill or a state-of-the-art sawmill."

She said such a system has often excluded smaller, value-added operations which cannot access wood supply. "How do we break free of that cycle, to free up some of that wood supply so that we can encourage innovation and entrepreneurship?"

"When there is a crisis, it's a well-known fact that the more diversity you have, the more you're able to adapt. When you're dependent on a single commodity and that gets hit, everybody hurts a lot and sometimes you don't recover," said Smith.

The NOSCP also wants to look at non-timber uses of the forest, such as environmental services: planting trees in deforested or old agricultural land, part of a global movement to store carbon by 'buying' trees. "People around the world are concerned about the role the Boreal Forest plays in protecting the global environmental climate."

The charter also recommends a new system of community forestry management be funded through current harvested timber royalties and a portion of stumpage fees, but that is another issue for further review, said Smith.

While more diverse forest industries would generate revenue, Smith said that possibly it's time for the province to look at making less money from its forests. "For a long time, we have made lots and lots of money on our forests, and maybe that has to change. Maybe we have to make an investment so in the longer term we get something back, whether it's environmental protection, or different products."

The charter prompted Lakehead University's forestry students to host a symposium on community forestry in February where over 200 attended. Other developments since its release include discussions between NOSCP and the MNR, ("simply to talk about what our ideas are, how the ministry might work with us to do things differently,") and Smith said forest industry reps have requested be kept informed of new developments.

The NOSCP is also awaiting the release of Dr. Bob Rosehart's economic renewal plan for the northwest to see if it includes any recommendations for community forestry.

Either way, Smith said it is time Ontario looked at pilot projects in B.C. and Quebec where forms of regional forestry are being implemented. "I think Ontario shouldn't be as fearful about it and start looking at other jurisdictions and start doing pilot projects in Ontario."