



# WILDLANDS LEAGUE

*A chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society*

February 18, 2020

Via email: [nick.baggs@ontario.ca](mailto:nick.baggs@ontario.ca)

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Canada

**Re: Proposed revisions to Ontario's Independent Forest Audit Regulation under the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act* (ERO 019-1006)**

Dear Mr. Baggs,

Thank you for receiving our comments on the proposed changes to IFA regulation.

**For reasons detailed below Wildlands League strongly recommends that the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry immediately stop the proposed revisions to Ontario's Independent Forest Audit Regulation under the *Crown Forest Sustainability Act* (ERO 019-1006)**

## **About Wildlands League**

Wildlands League is a leading conservation group representing approximately 30,000 supporters in Ontario. We've been working in the public interest since 1968, beginning with a campaign to protect Algonquin Park from development. We are a team of policy experts, strategists and communicators protecting Canada's natural world.

We have extensive knowledge and expertise of forestry and other land uses in Ontario and a history of working with governments (provincial, federal, Indigenous and municipal), communities, scientists, the public and resource industries on progressive conservation initiatives. Throughout our 50+ year history we have provided expert policy advice to improve forestry in Ontario and to ensure Ontario meets its commitments around sustainability, biodiversity conservation, public consultation and respecting Indigenous rights. A recent example of high relevance to the Independent Forest Audit changes and related proposals associated with the draft Forest Sector Strategy is our *Boreal Logging Scars*<sup>1</sup> report. In the report, we detail how the widespread, unchecked use of full tree clear-cut logging in Ontario has resulted in unreported and extensive deforestation and impacts on carbon storage.

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<sup>1</sup><https://loggingcars.ca/>



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## Comments

According to the proposal, 'The Ministry is proposing changes to *Ontario Regulation 160/04, Independent Forest Audits* [IFAs] to provide flexibility for selecting and scheduling management units (MU) for audit.' The main thrust is a move from a requirement to conduct IFAs every 5 years to a 10 year schedule, with even more flexibility to extend audits further for a range of forest management administrative reasons. It is also claiming to improve transparency by having audit reports available on a public website, rather than tabling them in the legislature. Together with associated changes in the Forest Manuals, we fear that this proposal will result in reduce transparency and decrease the oversight function of IFAs to practical irrelevancy. However, by not providing the details of the proposed changes to the regulation, a more precise determination of impacts is not possible.

While we appreciate any sincere effort to improve transparency, it is unclear how this proposal will do so. Once tabled in the legislature, IFAs are already available to the public (<https://www.ontario.ca/page/independent-forest-audits>). It may be helpful to make the audits available as soon as they are approved but ceasing to table these documents in the legislature entirely will only reduce their significance. Whatever the ease of access of a new portal, it will not make up for the reduced transparency that slashing audit frequency by half of will introduce.

Currently, audits already may be up to 7 years apart. There is also often significant delay in tabling them in the legislature (up to 2 years). A move to 10-year (and likely longer) audit frequency will exacerbate this situation dreadfully. Forest Management Plans are already sometimes delayed by several years. Related proposed changes to the Forest Manuals (ERO number 019-0715) would ease the requirements further for extending plans and preparing Contingency Plans. Allowing the Minister to extend the 10-year audit period even further for forest management planning processes threatens to push the audit process into irrelevance.

There is no apparent thought given to the fact that there are often situations that require MORE frequent audits. This is very telling. These situations could include:

- an audit has been failed,
- an audit that has uncovered significant findings,
- a forest tenure that is not certified to an independent system or
- when there is a new tenure holder.

A move from 5-year audits to 10-year plus audits will not only reduce transparency, it will reduce oversight and the ability to manage forests in a sustainable way. Any shortcoming in forest management will have an additional minimum 5 years of impact before even having a chance to be addressed. For example, with a fundamental responsibility like forest regeneration, an additional 5 years of lost regeneration would mean substantial loss of forest productivity and climate mitigation and increased costs to re-do renewal efforts. It is therefore doubtful that halving the audit frequency would reduce costs. It would likely only increase them and compound existing issues in forest management and the associated liabilities.



As a case in point, we have recently found compelling evidence that the fundamental responsibility of regenerating forests fully and minimizing forest loss has been challenged by the application of full tree harvest as recorded in our [Boreal Logging Scars](#) report. See Appendix 1 for a synopsis of key findings.

Given these documented failures of current management to achieve sustainability and the lack of any consideration of situations requiring more frequent audits, this proposal appears to be another dubious attempt to facilitate the cost-cutting aspects of the draft Forest Sector Strategy while undercutting the sustainability of logging. Rather than diminishing the oversight capacity of the IFA process, Ontario needs to enhance it. Wildlands League cannot support this change.

### **Conclusion**

Pursuing this proposal and the associated draft Forest Sector Strategy and other supporting proposals would fundamentally undermine the province's claims of sustainable forest management internationally and in the marketplace. It's also a curious proposal given the intention of Ontario to expand markets for its wood products "to meet current and future environmentally-conscious consumer choices".

Environmentally-conscious consumers are not going to want products sourced from controversial areas and at the expense of at-risk species or a safe climate.

Wildlands League is deeply concerned by the direction of this government on the care and oversight of public forests. Our fears about the draft Strategy turning into a timber giveaway exercise have not been allayed by the draft Strategy itself or the five postings that came after it, including changes to the IFA schedule. In fact, the more we read the more alarmed we become. The government's approach to open for business is short-sighted and will ultimately put it at odds with the environmentally conscious consumers it seeks and everyone who relies on our precious forest resources to be well managed in perpetuity.

The proposal appears to contemplate little more than reducing oversight while opening up more harvest for the exclusive benefit of industry without addressing the significant and growing risks of these practices. We call for the government to stop the direction of the proposal and the associated draft Forest Sector Strategy and its other supporting proposals. Instead, the government should undertake genuine consultation with members of the public and civil society groups on how to address both the biodiversity crisis and the climate emergency while growing a stronger forest industry.

Sincerely,

Dave Pearce,

Forest Conservation Manager, Wildlands League

Cc: Assistant Auditor General, Commissioner of the Environment, Jerry De Marco  
(Jerry.DeMarco@auditor.on.ca)

## **Appendix 1**

### **A wake-up call from Ontario's logged forests: *Boreal Logging Scars* Key Findings**

A recent study of five boreal forest management units in NW Ontario has measured the highly significant productive forest losses of conventional clear-cut logging practices in Ontario.<sup>2</sup> This 2-year independent research on a large area of managed forest studied both the impacts in the forests, as well as the body of forest management documentation available for each of these forests. It found that 10-24% (average 14.2%) of individual clear-cuts studied were essentially barren from logging infrastructure 20-30 after logging. Considered over 30 years, such impacts are estimated to have negatively impacted 650,000 ha of productive forest across Ontario, leaving them essentially barren of tree cover.

A key comparative finding from the accompanying documentation research is that these five management units have all substantially under-estimated these productive forest losses compared to the measured impacts from sampled clear-cuts. One management unit did not appear to estimate any area losses at all, and the other 4 estimated a range of 0.5-5% compared to the area logged. Comparing this 0-5% estimated forest loss to the 10-24% measured in the study is one way of showcasing the substantial oversight gap that this policy regime has actually produced under management. These estimates feed into all of the machinery of this current forest management policy regime, importantly including determining "sustainable harvest levels" allowed in each forest. This level of oversight error can be expected to have significant risks at the expense of long-term forest health, contrary to the purpose of the CFSA, and the mandate of the undertaking.

Three important findings from the study are critical to considering the efficacy of the current policy regime for protecting Ontario's forests: (a) these substantial productive forest losses are a product of the current policy regime and its oversight capacity, (b) they remain effectively undocumented, and (c) key sustainability decisions, such as harvest level decisions, are being made with a flawed understanding of the real state of Ontario's forests.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid*