

Forestry Commission turns to public for new policy

- [Jillian Trainor jillian@peicanada.com](mailto:jillian@peicanada.com)
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Aaron Sentner (left) shares his thoughts with Jean-Paul Arsenault, chair of the PEI Forestry Commission, after a public meeting concerning the creation of a new forest policy. Taking place at the O'Leary Town Complex on May 16, it was the second of six public meetings held to help Islanders provide input to the Forestry Commission. Jillian Trainor photo

Islanders had an opportunity to provide input to the PEI Forestry Commission on what they see as forestry priorities during the second of six public meetings being held across the province.

The commission is working to create a new forest policy for the province and wanted public feedback on what Islanders believe that policy should include.

Taking place at the O'Leary Town Complex on May 16, over a dozen attendees gathered for what was a more informal, open meeting. Woodlot owners and other attendees shared their thoughts and questions to Jean-Paul Arsenault, chair of the Forestry Commission, and other members of the commission.

"What we're mostly interested in is what you would like to see in the forest policy, what is working now, and what needs to change," said Mr. Arsenault. "There are 13 of us around the table that had been named to the commission. There's a lot of knowledge around our table, but there's a lot of knowledge outside too. And that's really the reason for the public meetings."

Mr. Arsenault explained how the province's Forest Management Act was first passed in 1988, but has hardly changed at all since then, and is due for a review.

A discussion paper has been created, giving a summary of what the members of the Forestry Commission have learned since they were appointed in January of 2023, listing 13 issues the Commission believes are critical to the development of a new forest policy. These issues include legislative framework, maintaining forest area, encouraging better private woodlot management, managing public forests, encouraging more resilient forests, and increasing readiness for the next Hurricane Fiona.

"I liked the open discussion," said Aaron Sentner, whose family owns a private woodlot. "I just hope it gives the private woodlot owners and the various community groups a voice to be able to have their opinions heard on the policy changes and give everybody an opportunity to provide feedback."

Throughout the meeting, topics of discussion included the need for the forest sector to have an adequate and organized voice to better promote awareness of themselves and the issues important to them, how manual maintenance is important when it comes to ensuring biodiversity, the sustainability of biomass supply, and the Forest Enhancement Program.

“It’s a program that’s specifically designed for private woodlot owners,” said Mr. Arsenault. “If you’re a woodlot owner, you apply to join the program, you have a management plan prepared for your woodlot by an expert technician that is eventually sent off to the province, which will sign off on it if they approve, and then you can get financial assistance for various things that are in your plan, whether it be planting, or silviculture improvements, like thinning, and things like that.”

Mr. Arsenault said it’s a very broad-ranging program and is the keystone program of government when it comes to support for private woodlot owners.

Another issue discussed at the meeting was the state of Island forests, and how having only one variety of trees planted in a woodlot isn’t as feasible as once thought.

“Right now, I think (forests) are in a bit of a vulnerable state,” said Mr. Sentner. “After we had Hurricane Fiona and Hurricane Dorian, there was a lot of damage. I think it really woke people up to maybe some of the past methods of just having a single species growth or plantation approach isn’t the most resilient path for forestry management. One thing all that damage did do was open up a lot of area, and maybe open the discussion further for improved silviculture methods.”

Owen Doucette, a private woodlot owner also in attendance, agreed.

“I think there needs to be more public awareness, I think there’s a disconnect between the public and what I see in the forest sector,” he said. “What I’m learning now is that most people think that a forest that’s untouched is healthy when that is often not the case, as we’ve learned here today.”

For Mr. Sentner, one thing he would like to see added to the new forest policy is a focus on sustainability, maintaining the forested land that’s already here, and possibly expanding the forested land, and to try and increase the amount of forested area in a way that is cooperative with other groups, whether it be communities, or the agriculture sector.

“I’d like to see an improvement of diversity in the forest, tree species is the main thing,” he said. “And it would be nice to see a positive partnership formed between the private woodlot owners of PEI, and the government, and the industry.”