



Canadian Institute of Forestry: Speaking Out

Clearing the Air—Not the Forest: The Real Deal on Deforestation

Wednesday, May 27, 2015 – Mattawa, ON – The World Resource Institute (WRI) recently released a report claiming that Canada is second in the world in terms of tree cover loss, according to 2013 data. It is critical to consider how the WRI defines tree cover loss as there should be a clear distinction between natural cycles and man-made land use changes. In their report, the WRI lumps together timber harvesting, naturally occurring fire cycles, insect and disease damage, natural tree mortality, human-caused deforestation, and clearing trees for agriculture. This definition is problematic as it can lead to the impression that logging, insect and disease damage, and forest fires are forms of deforestation, which is incorrect.

Deforestation refers to the permanent removal of forest cover in an area, and the conversion of previously forested land to another use, such as agriculture or urban development. Timber harvesting, and natural disturbances such as fire or insect damage cause forest cover change, but none of these changes constitute deforestation, because the forest cover is renewed either by replanting or natural regeneration.

Canada has some of the most stringent laws in the world for protecting forest cover and ensuring the sustainable management of our forests. We are world leaders in scientific research that informs sound forest planning and management practices. In Canada, timber harvesting is practiced within the framework of sustainable forest management, and operates under laws, regulations, and policies that require all areas harvested on public forests to be reforested, either by replanting or natural regeneration. Since 94% of Canada's forests are on public land, the vast majority of forestry operations are held to this standard, which legally ensures deforestation does not occur on public forests.

Canada is also a world leader in third-party forest certification. By 2014, Canada had 161 million hectares of forest certified to at least one internationally recognized forest certification program—four times more than any other country, representing 43% of the world's certified forests. All of these systems require third-party audits, annual surveillance audits, and public disclosure of findings through audit reports.

The WRI report makes specific mention of the Boreal region, citing high rates of tree cover loss, mainly due to forest fire occurrence. The rate of deforestation in the Boreal forest is quite low, just 0.3% between 1990 and 2008. However, forest cover change is very common in the Boreal forest, as it is ecologically adapted to renew itself through disturbances such as fire. These large-scale disturbances are responsible for driving succession and help maintain forest health and vigour—it's built into the natural life cycle of the Boreal forest. Annual fluctuations are to be expected as natural systems do not follow specific patterns.

Nothing in the forest is ever static, and tree cover loss is a natural component of forest succession, particularly in Canada. Based on fire seasons or pest outbeaks, tree cover loss will vary year to year, but the trends in Canada's rate of deforestation are clear. Deforestation in Canada has been steadily decreasing over the past 25 years; 64,000 hectares were deforested in

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1990, and this was reduced to 45,800 hectares in 2012. Contrary to popular misconceptions, timber harvesting is not one of the leading causes of deforestation in Canada. In fact, the top three causes of Canadian deforestation are (1) agriculture; (2) urban development, transportation corridors, and recreation; and (3) natural resource extraction other than forestry. Deforestation affects a very small portion of Canada's forest lands—less than 0.02% in 2010. Canada's forests represent approximately 9% of global forest cover, but only 0.3% of global deforestation. A portion of this is also offset by increases in forest area due to afforestation efforts by individuals and organizations.

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