

Canadian Institute of Forestry/Institut forestier du Canada
“Voice of Forest Practitioners”

Position Statement

Public Participation in Decision-Making About Forests

Issue

Until recently, forest decision-making in Canada was carried out mainly by professional forest managers employed by timber tenure holders and by government. As in other areas of resource development, citizens everywhere are playing an increasingly meaningful direct role in forest decision-making. There are many reasons for this. For most public-policy issues, citizen participation has become an accepted element of decision-making. As the demands on forests increase, opportunities for conflict also increase. The Canadian public owns about 90% of the country's forests, and therefore has responsibilities and rights to participate in determining their future.

Background

Public participation may be defined as any situation where people other than resource-management professionals and tenure holders in forest decision-making are invited to give opinions on any matter in the decision process. There is a wide variety of degrees of public participation, and also of techniques and forms of participation. Public participation includes everything from surveys and open houses to full decision-making partnerships. There is concern, however, that mechanisms for public input in forest decision-making still require strengthening and further development.

Importance

Conflict over the management and use of public forests exists across Canada. Often these conflicts arise among forest users, but they also arise between users and, urban-based environmental organizations and citizens. Sometimes conflicts are beneficial, helping people reject bad ideas and focus direction. However, usually they are destructive and harmful, especially when communities become divided into bitter factions. Productive public involvement in forest decision-making can, on one hand, prevent unnecessary conflict, and, on the other, channel existing and new conflicts into collaborative searches for accommodating solutions.

Opportunities

Forest managers and policy-makers have ample opportunity for creating and implementing public participation exercises in forest decision-making. Planning exercises for public forests are undertaken every five or ten years for each forest (depending on the province), and represent the most common context for public input.



However, regional land-use strategies and provincial and national policy-development processes are also prime opportunities for engaging the public productively in forest decision-making. Recently, even private forest owners are realizing that careful involvement of the local public in forest planning can improve public relations and possibly even increase the revenues generated from the private lands.

Current Status

During the 1990s, public participation has found its way into forest decision-making in Canada at all levels. The public is involved in provincial and national forest-policy discussions and debates as well as local public-land forest-management planning exercises. Public participation is still maturing in practice, but the principle is now embraced in virtually all jurisdictions for all decision-making levels. Implementation of open and transparent processes is occurring everywhere, and practice is developing rapidly as people experiment with different techniques.

Rights and Responsibilities

Forest owners have the right to manage their lands for their own objectives, and have the responsibility to involve in decision-making all persons who may be significantly affected by such management. For lands in public ownership, agency managers have the responsibility to ensure that interested citizens have ample opportunity to make meaningful input into forest decision-making at all levels.

Citizens, for their part, have the right to become involved in forest decision-making for public-land forests. With this, though, comes the responsibility to become adequately prepared to make meaningful input. Resource professionals have the responsibility to provide timely, unbiased and relevant information for public deliberations. All parties have the responsibility to work together constructively in searching for innovative solutions to forest management problems.

Promising Future Directions

It is possible to foresee full implementation of effective and efficient processes for public participation at all levels of decision-making, from local forest-management plans through regional and municipal land-use strategies to provincial and national policy-making. We can expect to witness a growing maturity of practice led by creative process designers and implementers who will experiment with various techniques, and fed by continuous sharing of successes and failures through an active network of practitioners and participants. Doubtless there will be continued emphasis on group-oriented processes, complemented by a continued reaching out to any members of the public who want to contribute. Some public advisory groups will demonstrate sufficient maturity and willingness to assume higher degrees of responsibility, and will begin sharing decision-making roles with professionals and agency officials.

Public participation in forest decision-making in Canada is rapidly moving through its adolescence. While many issues still remain to be resolved, the signs are bright for a



long and productive maturity. Forestry professionals are displaying a welcome openness and considerable energy for acquiring public advice on their decisions. The pursuit of forest sustainability can only be enhanced with such promising directions.

CIF/IFC Position

1. The CIF/IFC fully endorses the concept of public participation in forest decision-making.
2. It supports the following attributes of such participation: (a) a balance of inputs; (b) an informed public; (c) consistent with the concept of sustainable development, a strong consideration for future generations; (d) clear definition of the rights, responsibilities and roles of all parties; and (e) respect for legal rights of forest tenure holders; (f) which are consistent with the principles of National forest programs.
3. The CIF/IFC calls for establishment and implementation of:
 - public participation for all levels of forest decision-making in processes that: (a) are proactive, open and fair; (b) help participants learn about the social, economic, ecological and technical aspects of forest management; (c) involve the public early and in all key planning functions and decisions, including process design; and (d) are flexible to permit local experimentation that fosters learning about promising approaches; and
 - training programs for both resource professionals and lay citizens, aimed at raising skills and understandings of approaches and techniques for productive public participation in forest decision-making.

The CIF/IFC

The Canadian Institute of Forestry / Institut forestier du Canada (CIF/IFC) is a national voice of forest practitioners. The CIF/IFC, formed in 1908, represents members who are foresters, forest technologists and technicians, educators, scientists and others with a professional interest in forestry. The Institute's mission is "*to provide national leadership in forestry, promote competence among forestry professionals, and foster public awareness of Canadian and international forestry issues.*"

We are people with a professional interest in forestry, working in government, industry, academic and consulting fields. Our members use their education, training, and experience to help manage the forests of Canada and to make the Canadian public aware of forestry.

This brochure is a statement of what we stand for - the Institute's position on Public Participation in Decision-Making About Forests.



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