

Collaboration integral to future of N.S. forestry

Capping off a year of pulp mill and sawmill curtailments and closures nationwide, on Dec. 20 Nova Scotia premier Stephen McNeil announced there would be no extension to the Boat Harbour Act for Northern Pulp – thus forcing the bleached kraft pulp mill to withdraw its effluent drainage pipe from a lagoon adjacent to Pictou Landing First Nation by Jan. 31. On the one hand, the #NoPipe collective of fishers, First Nation residents and environmental activists was elated, following years of lobbying for the pipe's removal from what has become one of the region's most polluted sites.

But shortly after the cheers died down, Paper Excellence, Northern Pulp's parent company, confirmed the mill would close because its proposed replacement – an activated sludge system that would deposit diffused, treated effluent to open waters in a local strait – had not been approved by the province (read more in our news story on p. 6).

It was a dark day for the province's forestry industry. McNeil announced the government is spending \$50 million to provide support and skills training to affected workers across the supply chain – surely cold comfort to the scores of workers whose future employment outcomes are now uncertain, especially amid growing concerns about the longevity of Nova Scotia's forestry industry without the mill, and, as a result, the health of the province's economy.

What's going to happen to the mill long term remains to be seen, but, at least in the short term, media reports illustrate an industry decimated – 300 people out of a job at the mill itself, plus an estimated 2,400 affected in the supply chain. Northern Pulp purchased shavings, bark and wood byproducts from sawmills, which in turn bought logs from Northern Pulp. With the pulp mill closed, harvesting operations will dwindle, many sawmills will shutter, trucking contracts will dry up, and the more than 30,000 private woodlot owners in Nova Scotia will be deprived of a good portion of their business. The Port of Halifax has lost its largest customer; the region has lost one of its biggest employers.

At the time of this writing, Paper Excellence had informed the province that it would proceed with a new environment assessment report for the wastewater treatment facility – its only shot to make this closure a temporary one. The company will have up to two years to provide additional scientific information on the project. There are also unconfirmed reports that Paper Excellence will move the mill into a hot idle to maintain the boilers – but putting the mill on pause requires government approval because it involves draining the water (which wouldn't contain chemicals) needed to run through the boilers back into Boat Harbour.

Paper Excellence purchased Northern Pulp in 2011, and with it, inherited the distrust of a community that has been fighting for decades with the mill's various owners to stop the flow of untreated effluent into Boat Harbour's settling ponds. With this next phase, the company will need to do more than add statistics to a government-ordered report. Paper Excellence has the opportunity to start from the ground up and build a new, stronger – and transparent – relationship with the Indigenous community, and with other local stakeholders.

If an idle doesn't happen, or even if it does, Nova Scotia's forestry industry collectively must harness this chance to rebuild by welcoming new projects that support the bioeconomy and sustainable harvesting. It must also identify alternative markets for fibre that are not so dependent on the business of one company.

No matter what comes next, the entire supply chain must work together. There *will* be a new path – even if we can't yet see the forest for the trees. **PFC**



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