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REPORT

THE LOGGING LOOPHOLE:

HOW THE LOGGING INDUSTRY'S UNREGULATED CARBON EMISSIONS UNDERMINE CANADA'S CLIMATE GOALS

AUTHOR
Jennifer Skene



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Introduction

While the international community has struggled to curtail greenhouse gas emissions, forests around the world have been buying us time to transition to clean, renewable-energy economies. Forests act as giant carbon vaults, storing away in their wood, leaves, and soil more carbon than is found in all currently accessible coal, oil, and gas reserves combined.¹ Forests also continuously add to this carbon vault and in recent decades have absorbed nearly one-third of the greenhouse gases we release each year.² The global scientific community has made it clear we must limit warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (C) in order to avoid the worst impacts of climate change,³ and that doing so will require not just ending our reliance on fossil fuels, but also protecting intact and primary forests' ability to store and absorb carbon.⁴

The Canadian boreal forest, which comprises a quarter of the world's remaining intact forestland⁵ and is part of the most carbon-dense forest biome on the planet,⁶ is particularly key to achieving a 1.5 °C pathway. In its soils and vegetation, the Canadian boreal stores twice as much carbon as the world's oil reserves.⁷ It is central to global carbon regulation,⁸ making its protection and management a matter of global importance. Yet each year, industrial logging erodes the Canadian boreal's value for the climate, cutting down more than 400,000 hectares of the forest⁹ to turn it into toilet paper, newsprint, lumber, and biofuels.¹⁰ To put this in perspective, Canada falls just behind Brazil and Russia in terms of annual intact forest landscape loss, even when losses caused by wildfires are removed¹¹—with 60 percent of this loss occurring in areas leased by logging companies.¹² More than 90 percent of this logging is in the form of clearcutting,¹³ a practice in which the logging operation removes nearly all the trees from a given area.¹⁴

Industrial logging practices are undermining the boreal forest's value for the climate and resulting in significant annual emissions.¹⁵ When this forest is logged, it releases stored carbon from its vegetation and soils, and until it regenerates, it loses its capacity to continue absorbing the amount of carbon it held prior to being cut, creating a carbon deficit.¹⁶ Thus, just like building a new polluting factory or drilling a new oil or gas well, industrial logging in the boreal has long-term climate impacts.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the Canadian logging industry has consistently downplayed its impact on the global climate, as well as on species that live in the boreal. The industry

and its representatives are overselling the forest's capacity to regenerate, misrepresenting forest carbon dynamics, and omitting critical portions of its life-cycle analysis in order to present a narrative of climate sustainability¹⁸ that science is increasingly refuting.¹⁹

Unlike fossil fuel industries that must be phased out over the course of a few decades, a sustainable forest industry can align with keeping warming below 1.5 °C. However, given its current rate, intensity, and extent, today's industrial logging is incompatible with a goal of maximizing the boreal forest's critical role in carbon storage and threatens long-term, global climate repercussions.²⁰

The Canadian federal government has signaled an eagerness to become a leader in tackling land-based carbon emissions, including taking advantage of the boreal's unique characteristics and benefits through nature-based climate solutions,²¹ which use the value of natural ecosystems to address climate change.²² As a flagship part of this effort, the federal government committed to planting two billion net additional trees over 10 years as a means of meeting global emissions targets.²³ Additionally, the federal government has pledged to protect 30 percent of Canada's lands by 2030.²⁴ These are meaningful and encouraging measures that position Canada to lead on nature-based climate solutions and have an additional benefit of addressing global species collapse.

However, the government has left significant policy gaps around mitigating the logging industry's emissions and protecting intact forests—both crucial to achieving its climate targets. These loopholes bolster the logging

industry's false narratives around its own sustainability and undermine actions essential to safeguarding the boreal's role as a climate solution. Ultimately, there are two steps the federal government will need to take to address the impacts of logging and ensure that the boreal's climate value is preserved.

First, the Canadian government needs to adjust the way it calculates and reports its forest sector emissions each year to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), so that the reports accurately reflect net emissions from forests. Canada, in its carbon model, has not accounted for the fact that, contrary to industry claims, large areas fail to reforest following logging.²⁵ The model also does not consider critical soil carbon dynamics that may significantly increase logging's climate impact.²⁶ At a higher level, under the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) accounting methodology, Canada is able to present its managed forests as a net carbon sink, burying the impact of logging, which is a net source of emissions, within its broader calculation of the entire managed forest's carbon sequestration capacity.²⁷ Because the resulting portrait of Canada's forests is still that of a carbon sink, it significantly downplays the logging industry's carbon impacts,²⁸ allowing the industry to continue its current practices and even contributing to its claims that industrial logging is climate friendly.²⁹

Second, the Canadian government needs to regulate the logging industry's greenhouse gas emissions. Doing this could serve as a powerful incentive for the industry to adopt climate-friendlier practices and motivate the protection of intact forests. Canada's national carbon tax, the Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act, is a critical step in regulating and reining in the fossil fuel industry's emissions, but the absence of a similar measure for the logging industry leaves a vast carbon source unmitigated.

Canada's commitments concerning protected areas and nature-based climate solutions are promising indicators of the federal government's intentions, and the nation is well placed to reform current industrial forestry practices to be consistent with needed climate action and biodiversity protection. However, to fully lead, Canada must protect the climate value of its intact forests and adequately account for and regulate logging's carbon emissions. Doing so will not only benefit the climate but also protect unique and treasured species and ecosystems. Failing to update accounting methods and properly regulate the logging industry will make it difficult to secure a livable planet for future generations.



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The Canadian Boreal Forest's Global Climate Importance

The Canadian boreal forest stretches across North America, from the eastern shores of Newfoundland and Labrador to the rocky cliffs and mountains of the Yukon Territory.³⁰ This green crown across North America is home to more than 600 Indigenous communities, all of whom have relied on the land for millennia.³¹ It is also habitat for cherished species such as the boreal woodland caribou, Canada lynx, and pine marten and is the nesting ground for billions of migratory songbirds that traverse the skies across the Western hemisphere.³² However, the boreal forest's beauty and wildlife are only part of the region's richness. There is another, invisible layer to the boreal's wealth, found in its carbon-dense soils, trees, mosses, and peat bogs.

The boreal is the most carbon-dense forest biome on earth, storing twice as much per acre as tropical forests.³³ The Canadian boreal alone holds nearly twice as much carbon than exists in all the world's recoverable oil reserves.³⁴ This extraordinary storage capacity stems largely from the boreal's short summers and acidic soils.³⁵ Because the boreal is so cold for much of the year, dead biomass decays very slowly, trapping the carbon that is normally emitted through decomposition.³⁶ The coniferous forest's acidic soils also inhibit decomposition.³⁷ In contrast to the Amazon, which stores most of its carbon in vegetation, more than 80 percent of the carbon in the boreal is found within its layers of soil.³⁸ Some of this soil carbon has been locked up for thousands of years.³⁹

INTACT AND PRIMARY FORESTS

Not all forests are created equal, and intact and primary forests, terms that are used interchangeably in this paper to mean forests that are free of any significant human footprint,⁴⁰ have far greater biodiversity and climate value than forests that have been degraded by industry.⁴¹ These forests develop over a long period, as species of plants, animals, and fungi interact and form complex relationships across decades and even centuries.⁴² (The term "old growth" forest, sometimes used to refer to primary and intact forests, has no standard definition and is therefore not used in this paper.)

Protecting intact and primary forests, especially under the leadership of Indigenous Peoples, is essential to combating climate change⁴³ and is, in fact, one of the cheapest and most technologically feasible climate solutions.⁴⁴ These forests contain a diversity of species and habitats that is missing in areas that have been logged or impacted by other industries such as mining and oil and gas.⁴⁵ They also typically store more carbon than their degraded counterparts,⁴⁶ and they can be more resilient to natural disturbances like fires,⁴⁷ which is increasingly important as climate impacts worsen.



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Industrial Logging's Climate Impact

Industrial development has taken a large toll on Canada's boreal forest over the past century.⁴⁸ Though logging rates have declined somewhat in the past two decades, the logging industry nonetheless logged more than 11 million hectares of boreal forest between 1996 and 2015,⁴⁹ an area more than twice the size of Nova Scotia. Today the logging industry fells an area the size of seven NHL hockey rinks every minute.⁵⁰ Over the past several decades, loss of forest habitat from logging has led to a decline in wildlife populations such as the boreal caribou.⁵¹ In addition, while some Indigenous communities directly benefit from and support logging operations, many others oppose the rate and scale of industrial logging in their territories, which is threatening forests central to their ways of life.⁵²

Industrial logging also has an unseen global impact on the climate.⁶¹ NRDC conservatively estimates, using optimistic industry assumptions about how forests recover after being logged, that the current rate of logging in the Canadian boreal forest releases 26 million metric tons of carbon dioxide per year (not including emissions from products removed from the forest), which is equivalent to the annual emissions of 5.5 million cars.⁶² This is due to the fact that, while trees regrow, logging reduces the forest's capability to continue absorbing carbon. At the same time, soil disturbance, decaying logging litter, and increased plant respiration flood the atmosphere with carbon that had previously been locked up in the boreal ecosystem.⁶³ The rate of forest regeneration across the boreal cannot keep up with the amount of carbon that harvesting releases each year, resulting in a significant climate impact.⁶⁴

BOREAL CARIBOU

Boreal caribou, the iconic species emblazoned on Canada's quarter, have been federally listed as "threatened" since 2003⁵³ and are declining across Canada at a rate of 30 percent every 18 years.⁵⁴ Boreal caribou depend on intact forests for their survival,⁵⁵ and human-caused habitat disturbance, principally due to industrial logging, is their primary threat.⁵⁶ Today only 15 of Canada's 51 boreal caribou herds are self-sustaining for the long term given the level of disturbance to their habitat.⁵⁷ Further, caribou are an indicator species, meaning that a population's decline signals broader concerns in the forest ecosystem.⁵⁸ The condition of this species is thus a proxy not only for the forest's climate value⁵⁹ but also for logging's impact on other species.⁶⁰



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The potential effect of logging on boreal soils is particularly concerning. Because of the carbon density of boreal soils, releasing even a small proportion of this carbon can have a significant climate impact. While the full relationship between logging and soil carbon is still being studied, clearcutting can affect soils through changes in temperature and sunlight, compaction, and other physical disturbances.⁶⁵ As a result, the vast amounts of organic material stored there become more susceptible to decomposition, potentially converting carbon that had once been safely trapped within the boreal soil into atmospheric carbon dioxide.⁶⁶ One meta-analysis of soil carbon losses catalogued around the world found an average loss of 11.2% of carbon from the soils after logging.⁶⁷ Logging's impact on the carbon stored in deeper soil layers is more uncertain, but potentially significant.⁶⁸

Clearcutting intact boreal forests also reduces the forest's capability to continue absorbing carbon while the trees regrow. Ultimately, the net effect of clearcutting over time is to create a landscape with more young trees and fewer older ones, pushing tree age and therefore carbon stores to a lower baseline.⁶⁹ The shorter the harvest rotation (the number of years between logging operations in the same area), the lower this baseline. While there is some evidence that younger trees do absorb carbon at a faster rate than older ones,⁷⁰ replacing an older and larger forest with a younger stand creates a long-term carbon debt.⁷¹ Older forests already hold massive amounts of carbon, and they

and the soils around them continue to absorb carbon as they age.⁷² Not only does it take decades for a new tree to reach the size of the felled one and absorb the amount of carbon that the felled one previously held, but during that time the now-felled tree would have continued to sequester carbon.⁷³

LOGGING SCARS: DEFORESTATION'S SIGNIFICANT, BUT HIDDEN, LEGACY

Unfortunately, current carbon emissions estimates, while troubling, may not even tell the whole story. They likely downplay logging's full climate impact because they assume complete forest recovery, in alignment with industry and provincial government claims that the forest grows back entirely after it has been cut (i.e., for every tree that is cut down, another tree regrows).⁷⁴ Under this assumption, eventually the forest will regain the carbon sequestration capacity and biodiversity functions it had prior to being clearcut, and this, the logging industry claims, makes it inherently sustainable.⁷⁵ And because the forest is not converted to another use, such as farmland or city development, Canada does not classify the logging that is occurring as "deforestation," instead designating it as "degradation."⁷⁶

However, in addition to the fact that, as discussed below, second-growth forests tend to lack the same ecosystem services and health of primary forests,⁷⁷ a study of more than two dozen logged forest sites in northwestern Ontario found that more than 14 percent of the logged area was essentially barren 20 to 30 years after the logging occurred.⁷⁸ Nor was there evidence from those sites that trees would become reforested by the time re-logging of the site is planned.⁷⁹ These long-term scars are due to the creation of logging roads and "landings," where logs and unwanted logging residue are processed with heavy equipment and stacked, compacting the earth and suppressing regrowth.⁸⁰ While that research covered only one region of Ontario, the full-tree logging practice that led to this deforestation, in which the entire logged tree is dragged to the roadside, is the dominant approach in Ontario and accounts for about 50 percent of logging in Quebec.⁸¹ It is also used in British Columbia, Alberta, and the prairie provinces.⁸² Thus, it is likely that these scars exist in clearcuts throughout much of the Canadian boreal.

As a result, while Canada claims that it has nearly zero deforestation—and proudly holds itself up in contrast to countries like Brazil and Indonesia—the truth is that a significant portion of forest is not regrowing. If the results from the 27 clearcuts studied are indicative of conditions across all of Ontario (which should itself be a research priority), uncounted logging infrastructure in this province alone would increase Canada's reported deforestation rate by 700 percent.

In addition to harming wildlife, these essentially barren areas have a significant carbon impact. Because they



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Logging scars in Ontario.

remain stripped of productive forest cover, they remain in a significant carbon deficit.⁸³ Yet, because provinces have not reported these deforested areas in their forest surveys, these deficits are undocumented in Canada’s annual accounting, meaning the logging industry’s climate impact is understated. By 2030, assuming the current rate of deforestation continues, these logging scars plus 11 years of additional ones in Ontario will have reduced the forest’s climate mitigation potential by a total of 41 million metric tons of CO₂, equivalent to more than a year of emissions from Canada’s passenger vehicles.⁸⁴

THE REDUCED VALUE OF SECOND-GROWTH FORESTS

Even where trees do return, there is evidence that these second-growth forests do not provide the same ecosystem services or have the ecological health of the original forest.⁸⁵ This is exacerbated by the logging industry’s practice of replanting fewer species of commercially



A replanted forest in Ontario.

valuable trees that are all of a uniform age.⁸⁶ This “logging-centric” practice creates a regrown forest that is intentionally less biologically and structurally diverse than it was prior to logging.⁸⁷ Even under ideal natural regeneration conditions, however, it can take well over a century for a forest to achieve its original structural and biological diversity,⁸⁸ along with its original carbon storage and sequestration potential.⁸⁹

The degradation of intact forests also has an often overlooked impact on the ecosystem’s overall resilience. Intact forests are more resistant to natural disturbances and more adaptable to climate change than are previously logged, second-growth areas.⁹⁰ Though there is a range of predictions for how forests will respond to a warming climate, studies have shown that industrial logging can exacerbate fire risk and increase fire intensity.⁹¹ Previously clearcut forests are also often more susceptible to harmful invasive species, especially insect infestations.⁹² As a forest loses its ability to fend off or recover from these disturbances, it will experience even greater carbon loss.

WILDFIRE

Wildfires have been integral to the boreal forest’s ecological health since time immemorial. As wildfires become more frequent and more extreme, industry often claims that logging thins the forest and prevents wildfires from raging out of control. However, this argument deflects attention from logging’s overall ecological impacts and omits the fact that, in the face of wildfires, protecting intact forests only becomes more urgent.⁹³

While some forestry activities can be helpful in reducing the frequency of fires,⁹⁴ intensive logging practices like clearcutting and second-growth forests are often associated with more frequent and intense blazes.⁹⁵ In addition, in terms of ecological disturbance, fires are not biologically, chemically, or structurally equivalent to clearcut logging.⁹⁶ Typical wildfires burn off less than a quarter of the total biomass, and much of the resulting dead wood continues to store carbon⁹⁷ or is converted to charcoal, which has an average age in the soil of 600 to 2,000 years.⁹⁸ By contrast, clearcut logging removes almost all of a region’s trees for conversion into products with far shorter life spans.

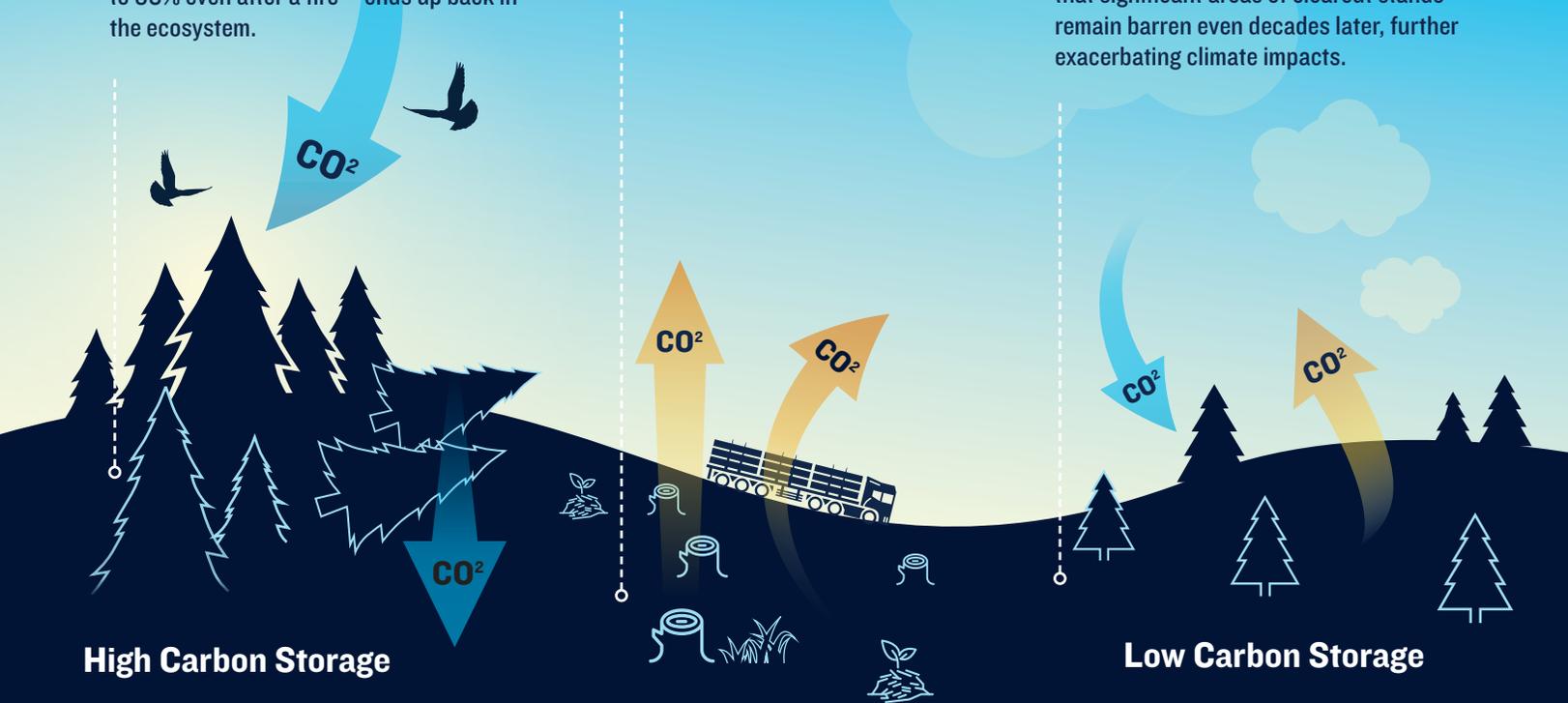
Furthermore, the climate-caused increase in fires is not occurring uniformly across Canada, meaning that an argument that logging will reduce wildfires would be irrelevant in some areas. This is especially true in the eastern boreal forest, which has avoided the large-scale fires that dominated the summer and fall news cycles in Canada in recent years.⁹⁹ Models forecasting climate change impacts show that this trend will continue, with eastern forests far less impacted by fires than western ones.¹⁰⁰ This further drives the need to protect intact forests—especially in the east, where a significant percentage of boreal logging occurs—as critical bastions for carbon and biodiversity in a changing climate.

HOW CLEARCUTTING THE BOREAL RELEASES CARBON INTO THE ATMOSPHERE

1. An intact boreal forest has vast stores of carbon locked away—more than 80% of which is found in its soils.^{iv} Even older trees continue to sequester carbon as they age. When a tree dies, it slowly releases some of this carbon over time, but much of the carbon—up to 90% even after a fire—ends up back in the ecosystem.

2. Logging leaves woody debris and disturbs the carbon-rich soil, emitting carbon into the atmosphere.^{vii} Clearcutting also dramatically reduces the landscape's capacity to sequester carbon, resulting in a carbon debt.

3. The clearcut forest continues to emit carbon from the soils and logging debris. As trees regrow, they begin absorbing carbon, but the forest remains at a significant carbon deficit from where it was before. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that significant areas of clearcut stands remain barren even decades later, further exacerbating climate impacts.



High Carbon Storage

Low Carbon Storage

4. After the wood is cut and manufactured into a long-lived Harvested Wood Product (HWP), it retains only a fraction of its original carbon—as little as 15 percent.^{ix} However, much of the wood from Canada is instead turned into paper or throwaway tissue products, which are even less effective at retaining carbon. When the wood is burned for biofuel, all its carbon is emitted.^x As an HWP ages, it continues to emit its remaining carbon.^{xi} When it is discarded in a landfill, it begins emitting both carbon and methane.^{xii}



ⁱ Joshua Axelrod, "Pandora's Box: Clearcutting in the Canadian Boreal Unleashes Millions of Tons of Previously Uncounted Carbon Dioxide Emissions," NRDC, 2018, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/pandoras-box-clearcutting-boreal-carbon-dioxide-emissions-ip.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Liao C, Luo Y, Fang C, Li B (2010) Ecosystem Carbon Stock Influenced by Plantation Practice: Implications for Planting Forests as a Measure of Climate Change Mitigation. *PLoS ONE* 5(5): e10867. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0101067>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wildlands League (2019) Boreal Logging Scars: An extensive and persistent logging footprint in typical clearcuts of northwestern Ontario, Canada. <https://logging-scars.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/MVUploads/LOGGING-SCARS-PROJECT-REPORT-FINAL-Dec2019-Summary-LR.pdf>.

^{iv} Pan, Y., Birdsey, R.A., Fang, J., Houghton, R., Kauppi, P.E., Kurz, W.A., Phillips, D.L., Shvidenko, A., et al. (2011). A large and persistent carbon sink in the world's forests. *Science* 333, 988–993.

^v Sebastiaan Luyssaert, et al., "Old-Growth Forests as Global Carbon Sinks," p. 213-215. N. L. Stephenson, et al., "Rate of Tree Carbon Accumulation Increases Continuously With Tree Size," *Nature* 507(7490) (March 6, 2014).

^{vi} Statement from Dr. Mark E. Harmon, Professor Emeritus to the United States House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Concerning the hearing on Climate Change and Public Lands: Examining Impacts and Considering Adaptation Opportunities, Committee Hearing Date: February 13, 2019 Testimony Date: February 21, 2019

^{vii} Joshua Axelrod, "Pandora's Box: Clearcutting in the Canadian Boreal Unleashes Millions of Tons of Previously Uncounted Carbon Dioxide Emissions," NRDC, 2018, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/pandoras-box-clearcutting-boreal-carbon-dioxide-emissions-ip.pdf>.

^{viii} Joshua Axelrod, "Pandora's Box: Clearcutting in the Canadian Boreal Unleashes Millions of Tons of Previously Uncounted Carbon Dioxide Emissions," NRDC, 2018, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/pandoras-box-clearcutting-boreal-carbon-dioxide-emissions-ip.pdf>.

^{ix} Seton Stebert et al., Emission Omissions: Carbon Accounting Gaps in the Built Environment, IISD (2019), <https://www.iisd.org/sites/default/files/publications/emission-omissions-en.pdf>.

^x Statement from Dr. Mark E. Harmon, Professor Emeritus to the United States House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Concerning the hearing on Climate Change and Public Lands: Examining Impacts and Considering Adaptation Opportunities, Committee Hearing Date: February 13, 2019 Testimony Date: February 21, 2019

^{xi} Ann Ingerson, Carbon Storage Potential of Harvested Wood: Summary and Policy Implications, Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies for Global Change, 16(3): 307-323 (2011).

^{xii} Seton Stebert et al., Emission Omissions: Carbon Accounting Gaps in the Built Environment, IISD (2019), <https://www.iisd.org/sites/default/files/publications/emission-omissions-en.pdf>.

Shortfalls in Canada's Climate Policies

The Canadian government has made strong and unprecedented commitments to nature-based climate solutions. As part of this shift, it is pursuing the protection of 30 percent of its terrestrial areas by 2030¹⁰¹ and a commitment under the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change to “protect[] and enhanc[e] carbon sinks including in forests, wetlands and agricultural lands.”¹⁰² These actions are a critical and positive development for both the global climate and the species that rely on intact boreal forests, and they signal the federal government’s understanding of the boreal forest’s key role in addressing the climate crisis. However, by failing to adequately account for and regulate the logging industry’s carbon emissions, Canada is not creating the proper incentives for provinces and industry to meet these goals. Instead it is leaving the management of a significant carbon source in the hands of industry, trusting it will self-regulate. At the same time, policy platforms promoting harvested wood products as a climate solution threaten to undercut the very carbon storage goals they intend to achieve.

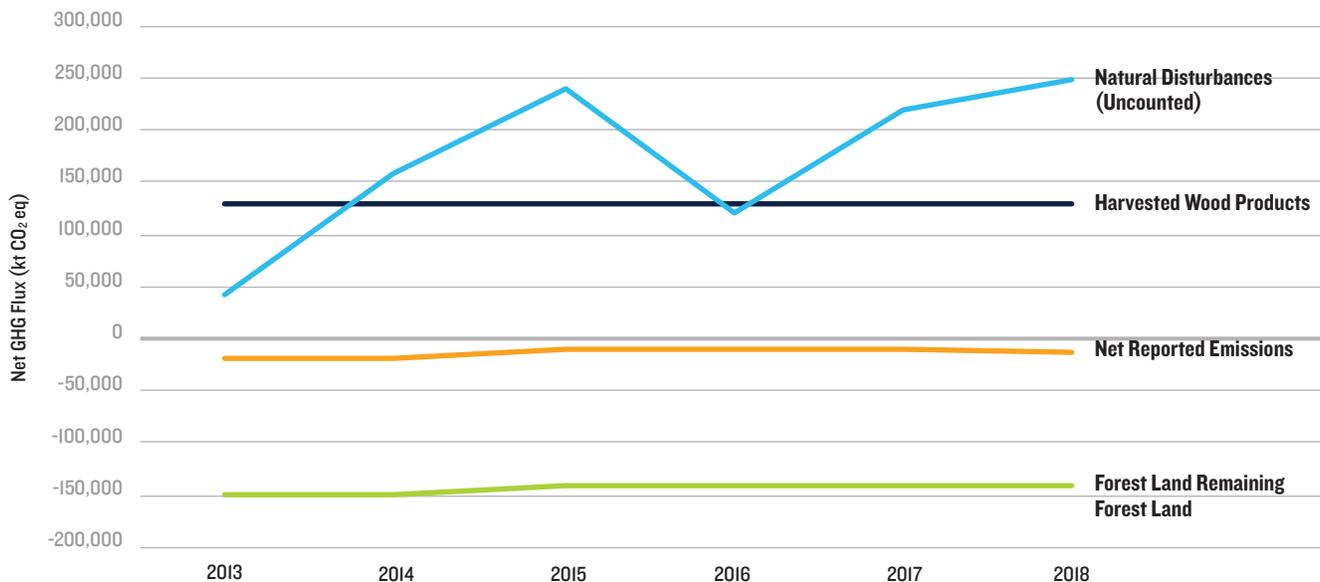
CANADA'S CARBON REPORTING

Each year, Canada is required to submit a National Inventory Report to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), an account of the country’s annual greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁰³ Canada includes estimated emissions from its managed forests

under the category of Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry (LULUCF).¹⁰⁴ Canada, as allowed under IPCC rules, relies on modeled estimates rather than direct data.¹⁰⁵ In doing so, it adopts a number of problematic assumptions that downplay logging’s full climate impacts. For example, the model does not incorporate the climate impacts of mosses lost during logging, and the model’s assumptions around the rates of soil carbon loss may not account for industrial logging’s full impact on the soil.¹⁰⁶ While the science around industrial logging’s effect on soils is evolving, Canada has, in many cases, chosen to adopt more conservative assumptions or simply not incorporate these impacts. In addition, Canada’s model relies on provinces’ assumptions about the success of forest regeneration,¹⁰⁷ which studies have shown are not an accurate metric of actual forest regrowth. For instance, as discussed above, Canada’s reporting does not capture the climate impact of the significant logging scars found in one study of 27 sites in Ontario,¹⁰⁸ an exclusion that may also apply to other parts of Ontario and other provinces.

In addition, international accounting rules allow certain practices that distort the overall picture of land-based carbon flows (sources and sinks). For example, Canada’s emissions from logging are obscured because they are buried within the net positive carbon balance achieved overall by its managed forests. In its National Inventory Report estimating 2018 emissions, despite clearcutting more than 400,000 hectares of forest that year, Canada

FIGURE I: CANADA'S REPORTED FORESTRY EMISSIONS



reported that its forests had a net removal of greenhouse gases of 14 million metric tons CO₂e (Figure 1).¹⁰⁹ Canada is giving itself carbon credit for the forests it doesn't cut in its healthiest forest areas, positioning its managed forests as a net carbon sink, even if each year logging ultimately adds to the carbon in the atmosphere relative to an unlogged forest. This 14 million metric tons are now being counted toward Canada's 2030 emissions target, in essence helping to offset emissions from other sectors, even while climate-critical intact forests are being lost.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, Canada does not include impacts from natural disturbances like fires and insects in this carbon calculation,¹¹¹ which, especially given the increase in these disturbances in many parts of the boreal forest, oversells the ability of the remaining unlogged forests to offset emissions (Figure 1).

FOREST CARBON REGULATIONS

The lack of adequate regulation of emissions from the forestry sector means the industry is offloading the social and economic cost of its sizable climate impact onto the rest of the world. Canada recently took significant steps to begin using market forces to regulate its greenhouse gas emissions, passing a national carbon tax in October 2018.¹¹² This Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act set the initial price of carbon at C\$20 per ton in 2019 and will increase it to C\$50 per ton by 2022, with revenue going mostly to provide rebates to Canadian citizens.¹¹³ However, this carbon price does not apply to emissions from forest harvesting, leaving a significant gap in the emissions being regulated and ignoring a potentially meaningful source of revenue that could be used to help transition to a clean energy economy.

The absence of a carbon price on logging industry emissions also means that there are no direct financial incentives in place to drive climate-friendlier forestry or the protection of carbon-rich intact forests. While the federal government has discussed incentivizing forest protection through the sale of carbon offsets,¹¹⁴ which allow a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in one area to compensate for emissions made elsewhere, offsets alone will not be enough to meet international climate goals. This is because offsets treat reductions in forestry emissions as a replacement for decarbonization efforts when, in fact, Canada needs to both achieve a decarbonized energy economy and maximize the carbon storage in its forests.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HARVESTED WOOD PRODUCTS

A pervasive and misguided narrative, based on selective science and misleading assumptions, has made its way into federal and provincial policy in Canada. According to this narrative, logging is unreservedly good for climate mitigation, in large part because of the carbon benefits of durable harvested wood products (HWPs).¹¹⁵ For example, the Quebec government recently announced that, because

HWPs like lumber and finished wooden furniture continue to store carbon while the forest regrows from logging, increasing the potential stored carbon, the province would be expanding industrial logging as a climate solution.¹¹⁶ Similarly, the Ontario government has stated that “when carbon stored in harvested wood products is factored into carbon accounting, sustainably managed forests are always a carbon sink.”¹¹⁷

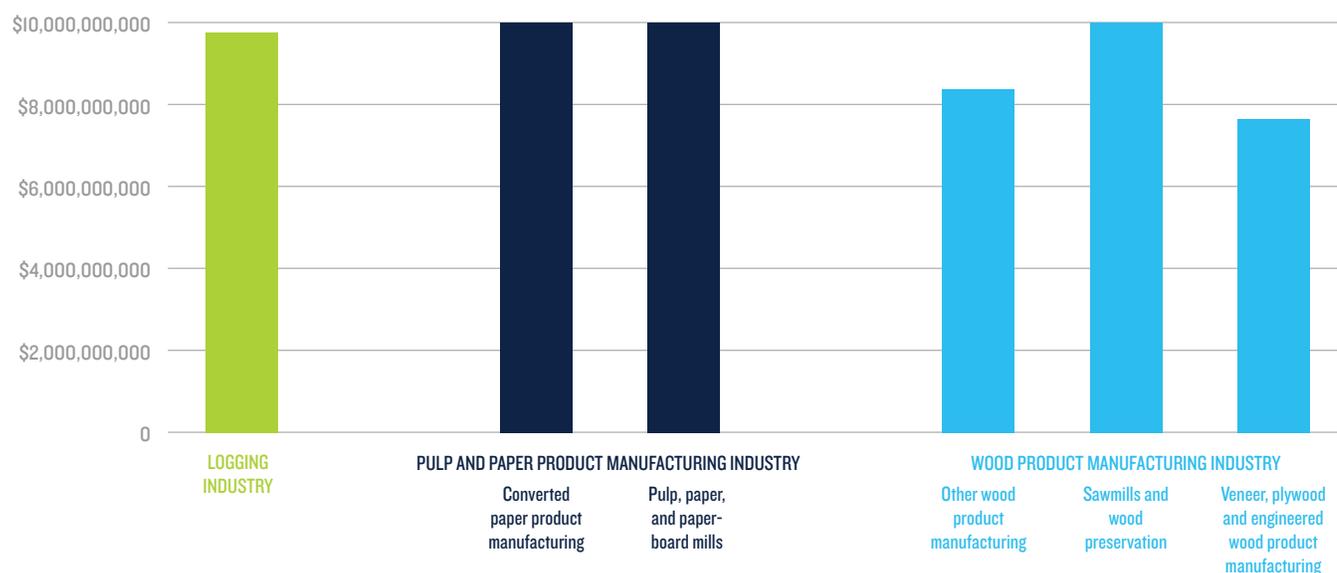
This narrative is also embedded in Canada's “Mid-Century Long-Term Low-Greenhouse Gas Development Strategy,” which outlines policy pathways for reducing the country's greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent by 2050.¹¹⁸ This document highlights HWPs as one emissions-reducing justification for continued intensive logging.¹¹⁹ Canada's “Pan-Canadian Climate Framework,” which outlines national and subnational policies to reduce Canada's greenhouse gas emissions, similarly emphasizes the role of industrial logging and HWPs in carbon storage and achieving its promised emissions reduction targets.¹²⁰

However, these policies ignore an important caveat that appears throughout the scientific literature: HWPs provide a climate benefit only under very strict conditions, and these conditions are rarely grounded in real-world logging practices.¹²¹ When forest products' complete life-cycle analysis, from cradle to grave, is conducted, the picture becomes far more complicated and the climate benefits tenuous.¹²²

First, life-cycle analyses of HWPs often do not account for the carbon impact of the logging itself, instead assuming carbon neutrality in the logging process and perfect forest regeneration.¹²³ The IPCC states that HWPs can provide carbon storage benefits if their wood is harvested “equal to or below” the natural forest regrowth rate.¹²⁴ When this condition is not met, HWPs become a climate liability. In fact, according to a recent study, when making more reasonable assumptions about logging practices, HWPs end up having an even greater carbon impact than concrete.¹²⁵

In addition, by the time a tree is logged, processed, and manufactured into a finished product, it has lost a significant amount of its stored carbon. Some studies have shown that as much as 40 percent of the tree's carbon remains in the biomass left as waste to decompose on the forest floor or burned for fuel.¹²⁶ Only about 20 percent of the tree's original carbon ultimately remains in the finished long-lived wood product.¹²⁷ HWPs are also relatively ineffective at retaining any remaining carbon in the long term.¹²⁸ After a century, the product may retain as little as 1 percent of the tree's original carbon.¹²⁹ Meanwhile, as allowed under IPCC rules, Canada does not actually count these inevitable emissions from HWPs at the time of logging, instead waiting to include them at a future date when the HWP is assumed to start emitting its carbon. This means these locked-in carbon emissions are not represented in the accounting for years, delaying a full picture of logging's climate impacts.

FIGURE 2: REVENUE FROM GOODS MANUFACTURED (CANADIAN DOLLARS)



Some HWPs can replace certain carbon-intensive building materials like concrete, bolstering their climate benefit. However, this depends on truly sustainable logging practices and should be incorporated into climate policy only after a robust, peer-reviewed analysis of the full carbon life cycle of Canadian boreal forest wood products. If the Canadian building sector is to move toward using more wood products, it has to start with an accurate assessment of what it would mean for emissions that come from forestry and the wood products it produces. Once the estimates of life-cycle emissions more accurately depict reality, it will then become clear which practices are truly part of the solution to address climate change.

It must also be taken into account that much of what the forest industry ultimately produces isn't actually long-lasting. Although Canada's carbon accounting does consider the differing lifespans of the sector's forest products, long-lived HWPs have received outsized weight in Canadian policy, particularly given the significant role shorter-lived products also play in the marketplace (Figure 2). More than 40 percent of the revenue from the manufacture of forest products in Canada comes from short-lived pulp and paper.¹³⁰ For example, the U.S. tissue industry is a significant importer of virgin forest fiber from Canada, purchasing more than 1.75 million tons of boreal pulp each year.¹³¹ These products are used once and discarded, after which they add to the rising carbon concentration in the atmosphere. Since a significant amount of the logged material quickly ends up in landfills or sewers, where they emit carbon and methane, the logging industry's claims about their contributions to carbon storage obfuscate the actual life span of many of their products.

At the same time, biomass production and export is also growing in Canada,¹³² further undermining industry arguments concerning their products' carbon storage capacity. Biomass, which consists of plants and plant by-products to be burned for fuel, is not a clean energy alternative to fossil fuels. When burned, biomass, at the point of combustion, usually has a carbon impact greater than that of coal and other fossil fuels¹³³ and creates a carbon debt that can last hundreds of years.¹³⁴

While markets exist for tissue paper and biomass, this does not absolve the Canadian forest industry from responsibility for the impacts of delivering these products. Like the coal, oil, and natural gas companies that feed a global fossil fuel market, the forest industry is responsible for enabling those markets to exist and should take responsibility for the biodiversity and climate impacts of its activities and products.

Finally, it is important to note that even long-lived HWPs are not an immediate source of emissions reductions. Even if they meet the narrow conditions for acting as climate-friendly products, it takes decades to realize the climate benefits from HWPs given the long timescale of forest regrowth. Therefore, these benefits would come too late to contribute to the emissions pathways the IPCC has outlined for keeping warming below 1.5 °C. Forests left intact, however, continue to provide immediate climate benefits in the form of stored carbon, helping achieve this target within the needed time frame.

Recommendations

As the Canadian government pursues a more resilient, just, sustainable future, it will need to prioritize the protection of the boreal forest's value for the climate. Doing so means protecting remaining intact and primary forests and, where industrial logging does occur, incentivizing climate-friendlier practices. In addition to positioning Canada as a leader on nature-based climate solutions, these policy recommendations would provide numerous co-benefits, including advancing Canada's reconciliation commitments to Indigenous Peoples and biodiversity protections. These recommendations should also be included as part of a green recovery plan, as each presents opportunities for jobs and economic stimulus.

CANADA SHOULD FULLY ACCOUNT FOR THE LOGGING INDUSTRY'S EMISSIONS

Canada has committed to net zero emissions by 2050, in alignment with the IPCC's recommendations.¹³⁵ However, by undercounting forestry's emissions and exempting them from regulation, Canada could severely undermine this commitment. The federal government is continuing to hone its greenhouse gas accounting procedures, and as part of this effort it must accurately monitor how well forests are actually recovering from logging and incorporate these findings into its accounting practices. This should document impacts not only from reduced tree cover, but also from the potentially higher-than-reported rates of deforestation found in provinces like Ontario.

Canada needs to also account for the differences between the carbon-sequestering capabilities of the intact forest and the capabilities of second-growth forests, as well as the carbon debt incurred when carbon-rich natural landscapes are converted through logging to carbon-poor landscapes. This requires a better understanding of how both natural and human-caused disturbances impact soil carbon storage. Developing a more robust understanding of these dynamics will help ensure that Canada's accounting actually reflects the true carbon balance and does not inadvertently undermine the goals of the Paris Agreement. In addition, because Canada relies on a model rather than direct data for its reporting, the government should clearly communicate these uncertainties and urge provinces and industry to adopt the precautionary principle in their logging and forest management policies.

CANADA SHOULD REGULATE THE LOGGING INDUSTRY'S EMISSIONS

The Canadian government should integrate logging emissions into its national carbon pricing program under the Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act. Revenue generated from pricing forestry emissions should then be invested into reversing forest degradation; promoting climate-friendly forestry and forest adaptation to climate change; increasing research and monitoring; helping forestry-dependent communities, especially Indigenous communities, to expand economic alternatives; and developing industries around alternative, more sustainable materials to address global demand.

Where logging continues in non-intact forests, this regulation would provide incentives to both provincial governments and industry to adopt climate-friendlier forest management practices that reduce impacts on the ecosystem's stored carbon and improve regeneration. Such practices include adopting longer harvest rotations, avoiding full-tree logging, selective harvesting, and facilitating regeneration centered on biodiversity and climate considerations.

CANADA SHOULD PROTECT REMAINING INTACT FORESTS

The federal government has outlined a policy platform to promote nature-based climate solutions, including a commitment to invest C\$3 billion over 10 years to plant two billion net additional trees across Canada.¹³⁶ While important, tree planting does not mitigate the damage done by clearcutting intact forests, which have a carbon benefit that is irreplaceable under any meaningful time frame. As a result, it is essential for the Canadian government to adopt robust protection for this globally vital ecosystem.

Under the Convention on Biological Diversity, Canada's federal government has committed to protecting 17 percent of its lands and inland waters by 2020, and has additionally promised to protect 25 percent by 2025, and 30 percent by 2030. These are strong and important commitments. With only about 10 percent of the boreal forest's carbon stores currently protected,¹³⁷ Canada needs to make the protection of intact regions in its managed forests a central element of meeting these commitments. In addition, where provinces are failing to protect critical boreal caribou habitat in intact forests, the federal government should employ laws, such as the Species at Risk Act, that enable them to step in and implement the needed safeguards.

CANADA SHOULD PRIORITIZE INDIGENOUS-LED LAND MANAGEMENT

Strong Indigenous land rights are not only critical to Indigenous self-determination and empowerment, but are also correlated with better protections for forest carbon and healthier forest ecosystems, including higher biodiversity.¹³⁸ In Canada, Indigenous Peoples have been at the forefront of more effective, sustainable land management, including through Indigenous-led protected areas and Guardians programs.¹³⁹ Their leadership is critical not only to empowering Indigenous Nations to determine their own futures, but also to ensuring that the forest is managed sustainably for the climate and biodiversity.

The Canadian government has taken positive initial steps to support Indigenous leadership, giving C\$25 million to fund a pilot Indigenous Guardians Network and C\$175 million in part to fund over 60 Indigenous-led protection initiatives.¹⁴⁰ While this funding is significant, it is a fraction of what Indigenous communities need to safeguard their traditional territories and manage the remaining intact boreal forests. Additional funding for Indigenous-led management should come from diverted logging subsidies for non-Indigenous-led operations, carbon pricing, and other sources to support this critical work.

Conclusion

Forests are our best natural allies, and if the world is going to reduce its emissions rapidly enough to avoid exceeding 1.5 °C of warming, we need all the help we can get. Focusing exclusively on energy decarbonization, while vital, misses a critical piece of the climate puzzle. In addition to phasing out fossil fuel emissions, countries must protect their carbon-rich ecosystems and enhance their ability to sequester carbon. To this end, countries with large remaining intact forest areas must do everything in their power to conserve and enhance these essential climate regulators. Doing so will not only protect our climate but help stem the global loss of species. We can no longer simply value forests such as the boreal for their supply of toilet paper, newsprint, and lumber, nor can the logging industry continue its current unsustainable practices.

Canada is the steward of a significant portion of the world's most carbon-dense, intact ecosystem, and it therefore has an essential role to play. It has made significant commitments that position the country to be a key leader on nature-based climate solutions. But with the ongoing, significant loss of intact boreal forests from industrial extraction and the failure to transition to climate-friendlier logging practices, time is running out. The Canadian boreal's carbon stores can be a critical resource or a devastating carbon bomb in the fight to protect our future. It's time for Canada to close the logging loophole, step into the climate leadership role it claims, and fully prioritize this global climate linchpin, safeguarding the forest in its indispensable role as one of the world's greatest climate allies.

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