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## Climate spiral feared in northern forests

Loss of trees would release gases -- and kill more trees: report

**Hanneke Brooymans**  
The Edmonton Journal

October 31, 2005

EDMONTON -- Canada must learn quickly how to adapt to climate change in the boreal forest, warns a report released today by a national advisory agency.

It could be too hot and dry for trees at the southern limit of the forest, says the report by the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, an independent body created by the federal government.

The increased intensity of fires and insect outbreaks will further ravage the forests. This will affect the forestry industry and the communities that are based in the forest, the report says. It would also have a global impact.

The boreal forests -- the northernmost forest zone in the northern hemisphere -- are the largest storehouse of carbon in the world. They store

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nearly twice as much carbon as tropical rain forests. Most of this carbon is in the ground, including vast stretches of peatlands.

If this carbon is disturbed, by fire or plow, it combines with oxygen to form carbon dioxide, a gas responsible for climate change. If boreal forest destruction increases enough, the forests will turn into a carbon dioxide source instead of a storehouse.

"So what happens to the boreal has a big impact on what happens to the climate," said Cathy Wilkinson, director of the Canadian Boreal Initiative.

The boreal group, formed in 2003, works with a wide range of conservation organizations, First Nations, industry and other interested parties to link science, policy and conservation activities in Canada's boreal forest.

"If all that carbon is released it can actually contribute to climate change."

Canada should set aside and conserve large chunks of intact forest as a buffer against the change so animals have a refuge, said Wilkinson, who served on the round table's boreal committee.

After the last ice age, areas not covered by glaciers acted as sources for the animal repopulation of the continent.

The transition zone between the southern fringe of boreal forest and the northern boundary of agricultural land is also considered crucial territory, said Gary Stewart, regional manager of Ducks Unlimited's boreal conservation programs.

Ducks Unlimited is working with Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries to reforest portions of this transition zone.

"A lot of that land that was cleared for agriculture has never been successfully cultivated," Stewart said.

Ducks Unlimited works to restore the wetlands portion of the boreal forest while Al-Pac plants the trees.

The boreal forest is one-third water and wetlands, Stewart added.

"A lot of Canadians in the south think this place is miles upon miles of Christmas trees, but it's actually a very complex ecosystem."

This complexity means adapting to the effects of climate change will be a huge challenge.

"There probably hasn't been enough work done in Canada on the adaptation issue in total," said Allan Amey, vice-chairman of the round table and president of Climate Change Central, based in Calgary.

All the studies show that no matter what we do about reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, there will be impacts of the climate change that has already been underway for at least a century, Amey said.


Other recommendations from the round table include encouraging forestry companies to conserve forests by giving them monetary incentives and calling a national leaders' conference on the future of Canada's boreal

forests.

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