

Agreement may not be worth the effort

As some members of the Natural History Society may know, the Forest Resource Development Agreement (FRDA) that provides funds for the management programs on private and crown lands is up for renewal in March. The federal government, which provides most of the funds, and the province are in the process of negotiating funding levels. Some of the reports from these negotiations leave me worried about the future of Island forests.

The federal government would like to eliminate the incentives that landowners receive when they have hardwood stands thinned. Most thinning improves the woods, taking out dead, diseased and malformed trees (except for a number of wildlife trees per acre), yet it is not financially feasible - it costs a lot more to thin than to clearcut. The incentive helps encourage landowners to thin rather than clearcut, to harvest fuelwood and yet leave the best trees behind with space to grow.

The incentive for site reclamation, which makes it feasible to cut poor softwood stands in preparation for replanting, is also being threatened. As someone who has worked in such stands, I can assure you that very few would get touched unless some incentive is available. It makes much more financial sense for landowners and contractors to cut down the best healthy stands.

Instead of increasing the incentives, the federal negotiators want to cut them out altogether. Another plan is to cut incentives by 15% and have the landowner make up the difference. This may be a good idea, but as demonstrated in other provinces, it is not practical. Cutters are not in a position to take a cut in pay, either.

Without hardwood thinnings and the conversion of poor stands to new plantations, I question the value of the forest management plan. Are we really willing to allocate tax dollars to a forestry plan that has only the production of pulp and softwood lumber in mind? The provincial Conservation Strategy calls for funding and assistance to private owners to continue at present levels. It says that "reducing financial assistance will discourage owners from continuing participation in forestry programs." It also recommends that the program should ensure increased development and use of hardwood species. It also goes without saying that a program that disregards the upgrading of hardwood stands by thinning would also show little or no interest returning more of our unproductive woodlands to the original Acadian forest, which involves selective breeding and planting of hardwoods.

I think it is time to decide whether a poor FRDA is better than no FRDA. I am not at all sure that it is. It is also time to let federal and provincial politicians know how important it is to keep improving Prince Edward Island's forests. I write this not as a cutter or contractor or even landowner, but as a lover of healthy woodlands.

Gary Schneider

Bird reports

- Great Blue Heron - 1, in Stanhope, Dec. 1 (DM)
 - 1 in Cardigan, Dec. 12 (BP)
- Cattle Egret - 1 in Point Prim, Oct. 29 (CB)
- Northern Goshawk - 1 over feeder at Baldwin Road, Jan. 4 (GS,RR)
- Sharp-shinned Hawk - 1 at Bunbury, Dec. 22 (SEV)
- Rough-legged Hawk - 1 at Traveller's Rest, Dec. 1 (RCP)
 - 1 at Rustico Island, Dec. 1 (DM)
- Bald Eagle - 1 at Stanhope, Oct. 15 (CP)
 - 1 at Murray Harbour North, Dec. 17 (FIR)

