



SUSTAINABLE. HUMAN.

For a forestry model aligned with today's challenges



unifor
lesyndicat | Québec

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1. PRESENTATION OF UNIFOR

Unifor represents 315,000 members across Canada. We are the country's largest private-sector union, with broad exposure in every major sector of the economy.

In Quebec, Unifor has nearly 14,000 members in the forestry sector, working in every region from Abitibi-Témiscamingue to Gaspésie. The workers we represent are involved in all levels of processing and in all areas of activity related to the forestry industry: silviculture, logging, firefighting, transportation, lumber, engineered wood, panels, sawmill equipment, pulp, paper, cardboard, packaging, cellulose, pellets, flooring, furniture, kitchen cabinets, doors, windows, printing, etc.

With expertise in everything from primary processing to forest fire fighting, engineered wood manufacturing and biorefining activities, Unifor's members have a unique perspective on the industry.

They also share in the future of this industry.

2. INTRODUCTION

The fire season of 2023 sent shockwaves through Quebec's forestry sector. Nearly a million hectares of productive forest land went up in smoke. In June, southern Quebec lost more forest land in 20 days than in the previous 20 years combined.¹ Many observers have also noted that the size of fires has changed. The largest blaze ever recorded in southern Quebec alone consumed more than 460,000 hectares.

These events offer chilling proof of the growing impact of climate change. No one can predict exactly what the fire season of 2024 or that of 2029 will look like, but at the very least, we must take the precaution of looking ahead and asking urgent questions about the future of our forests and the activities they support.

We believe that Quebec's forestry industry is at a crossroads. Long-time observers of the situation will claim, rightly so, that this assertion has been made many times before. But one thing is certain: the current situation has forced us to sit up and take notice of the new climate reality that is taking shape. Perhaps this will be the catalyst that finally spurs us to change our operating model, as many people have called for. However, it is important to remember that the effects of last year's fire season, while undeniably serious, are not the only factor we have to contend with.

Our relationship with the natural wealth of our forests, our vision for the forest industry and its workers, and the relationship we need to rebuild with First Nations, who have age-old ties to this land, are all factors that must be an integral part of this reflection process.

This process must be broad in scope, have a long-term horizon and offer new avenues. It is our hope that this exercise will lead to a genuine awareness of the situation and to a recognition of the importance of social dialogue and the inclusion of all stakeholders. It should signal the beginning of renewed ambition and pride.

3. OBSERVATIONS

“Forest management today must be seen as an integrated whole in order to reduce risks, preserve biodiversity, protect endangered species and generate socio-economic benefits.”

Advice of the Chief Forester of Quebec,² September 2023

In his advice published in the fall of 2023, the Chief Forester urged the government to recognize and, above all, respond to the crisis currently threatening the sustainability of the forestry sector. His message was clear: current forestry practices must be re-evaluated and adapted to a new context. The risk profile of our forests has changed, and the pace of change is accelerating. The foundations of our management practices must evolve and adapt. But while calling for a major shift in the industry, the Chief Forester is careful to point out the various ramifications of such a change of course.

As we all know, the choice of forest management approaches is closely linked to the overall dynamics of the forest industry and the viability of an economic activity that benefits the whole of Quebec. The Ministère des Ressources naturelles et des Forêts is fully aware that the choices made with regard to the management, development and shared use of Quebec’s forests will have a direct impact on jobs in the province’s forests and mills.³

3.1 An industry under pressure

It is also important to recognize that, beyond the growing impact of climate change and the recent fire season, both of which have contributed to this awareness, other drivers of change must also be included in the scope of our reflection process.

In recent years, we’ve talked a lot about the decline of the woodland and mountain caribou herds in Quebec. Nearly two years after the independent consultation process, and despite repeated threats and ultimatums from the federal government, the strategy for the preservation of this animal remains unknown to this day. However, we are well aware that it will have significant repercussions on management approaches, particularly in terms of additional restrictions on access to forest resources. The absence of clear information about the caribou protection strategy is undermining current planning and adaptation efforts.

In 2021, Quebec made a firm commitment to achieve the target of protecting 30% of its land by 2030, as advocated by the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. Ambitious interim targets (25% by 2025) suggest that action will be taken in the near future. Although significant progress has been made and Quebec is doing well in the Canadian context, current results hover around 17%,⁴ indicating that a significant gap remains to be bridged. What will be the impact of the announcements expected in the coming year regarding the remaining 8% of the target that needs to be met? These initiatives, carried out in parallel with the reform of forest management practices, will have potentially far-reaching consequences. But the questions surrounding their implementation remain unanswered.

For their part, First Nations peoples are no longer content with simply being heard and consulted; they want to decide their own future and exercise their prerogative over their ancestral territories. For too long, their views and aspirations have been ignored. Forestry activities have continued on territories with which Indigenous communities have close cultural, identity and historical ties. Their demands will have a crucial impact on forestry activities in the north and south. The recent blockades that have occurred (Wemotaci, northern Lac-Saint-Jean) reflect a power struggle with complex ramifications that seems to be directed as much at municipal and provincial authorities as at Indigenous institutions. The process of reforming management practices signals the opening of a new chapter in a highly sensitive discussion.

“... beyond the growing impact of climate change and the recent fire season, both of which have contributed to this awareness, other drivers of change must also be included in the scope of our reflection process.”

In addition to the intensifying effects of climate disruption, the impact of future wildlife habitat protection measures and the legitimate demands of First Nations, we also need to take into account the evolution of regulatory frameworks beyond our borders. The implementation of the European Union’s regulation on deforestation,⁵ slated for December 2024, signals further difficulties for the industry. At the heart of the coming trade dispute with Canada – as well as with American and Asian manufacturers whose exports to the European market include local wood products – are primary forest activities and the very principle of ecosystem-based management.

Finally, we are also seeing accelerating changes in the markets served by forestry companies. Growing demand for certain products is occurring simultaneously with the structural decline in other types of supply. These transformations have implications for management, and have a direct and decisive impact on the industrial structure and existing jobs.

3.2 An integrated approach

Given these observations, it’s easy to understand why one of the expressions used in the Chief Forester’s advice published last September attracted considerable interest from union organizations such as ours. It’s obvious to us that forestry activities are affected by multiple and complex pressures that require a thorough review of the way in which we manage them. Knowing this, we fully endorse the Chief Forester’s comments about the need to manage our forests as “an integrated whole.” We also note that the implementation of this ambitious proposal requires a project whose scope extends beyond his particular field of action, which is limited to the determination of allowable cuts.

With this formulation, the implicit signal sent by the Chief Forester to public decision-makers is that it is their responsibility to take charge of all the factors that lie outside his scope. Among these factors, the socio-economic aspect, which is inseparable from workforce

issues, plays a central role. As a union, we expect our public institutions' response to this major overhaul to address all the potential repercussions and propose concrete solutions for their mitigation. The effects on our members are potentially huge. In order to identify mechanisms adapted to their needs, we believe it is essential to bring together all the stakeholders concerned within a structured framework that allows us to assess and discuss all decisions on an ongoing basis.

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3.3 Expanding the scope of reflection

In the end, the Chief Forester's appeal was heard by the government. Meeting in Quebec City last November to assess the extent of the damage caused by the fires, we welcomed the announcement by the *Ministre des Ressources naturelles et des Forêts* that a process of reflection on the future of the forest had been launched. The formula proposed didn't go as far as the estates general we had hoped for, but it did offer some hope for a broad-based consultation exercise capable of addressing the adaptation challenges we're facing.

Upon reading the participant's booklet detailing the main themes and structure of the consultation, we realized that we had our work cut out for us in terms of conveying our concerns within the framework of the process. Indeed, none of the four main themes and 10 sub-themes proposed as part of the reflection panels on the future of forests dealt specifically with labour issues. Along with the other forestry sector unions gathered in Saguenay,⁶ we denounced this omission, without going so far, however, as to refuse to participate in the consultation process.

The Ministry's reaction of surprise, followed by its blanket dismissal of our collective call for a review of the consultation process served as a reminder of the wide gulf existing between the government and unions' approach to issues affecting workers. When launching a consultation, the choice of words and themes matters. For us, it is impossible to adequately address the concerns of workers on the basis of a theme that is strictly focused on economic development and regional benefits, or on the basis of a discussion centred on the grievances of forest managers and operators.

Let us be clear: these considerations are very important, but they primarily concern the perspectives and interests of companies, forest engineers and regional elected officials. They say nothing about how we intend to deal with the direct impacts on workers that will result from the coming changes. This approach is another reminder of the extent to which the current government struggles to integrate labour issues into its thinking.

What kind of industrial strategy does Quebec intend to deploy to improve the sustainability of forest industry practices, and what impact will this strategy have on workers and their working conditions? How do we ensure the economic security of individuals working in the industry in a context of changing management and production practices? How do we plan to recruit and retain workers in a context of labour shortage, and in sectors of activity that are less attractive? What measures will be developed to support workers at the level of training, skills adaptation, requalification and potentially relocation? Finally, what is the plan for people who have spent most of their working lives in this industry, and for whom such an effort will be difficult to envisage at this stage of their careers?

3.4 In search of dialogue

All these questions warrant special attention and the development of planned measures at the earliest stages of the forthcoming transition. The current consultation framework does not allow us to produce a satisfactory response. Nor will we find the answers we're looking for in the potential announcements in the coming months regarding the Ministry's new directions or programs, particularly if these measures continue to be developed in a vacuum. The current crisis calls for formal consultation mechanisms that are more structured, predictable and transparent and that will allow the unions, governments and companies in this sector to engage in a genuine tripartite social dialogue in order to address the issues affecting workers.

Unions are most often left out of corporate decisions, which are made based on criteria defined by the company's themselves. In most cases, these decisions are communicated piecemeal, and often belatedly, to employees. For their part, the various levels of government and their respective ministries seek to take action on the different issues that fall within their area of activity or jurisdiction, but they often do so in the absence of overall coordination. Several ministries, including forestry, environment, wildlife, natural resources, energy, economy, innovation and employment, are involved in the forestry sector. It is often difficult for workers to comprehend the logic and purpose of the initiatives that are put forward, let alone try to influence them.

Some 25 years ago, the repatriation of active employment measures from the federal government led to the creation of a dynamic partnership on workforce development that is unique to Quebec. The Commission des partenaires du marché du travail (CPMT), a consultative body that brings together representatives of employers, unions, educational institutions and community organizations, plays a key role. This model is the envy of our union brothers and sisters elsewhere in the country, and its many achievements deserve to be highlighted. The Commission's work contributes to the development of a culture of social dialogue that sets us apart in North America, and we are very proud of it.

In our view, the intensification and acceleration of transition factors affecting several industrial sectors, including forestry, must be more strongly reflected in the CPMT's actions. The consultation and coordination process launched at the end of 2021⁷ with the aim of analyzing the workforce challenges associated with the green transition was an important first step. The creation in 2023⁸ of a centre of expertise in green transition continues in the

same vein. We believe we need to go further, faster, and to prioritize certain sectors based on a more applied approach. In this respect, forestry is an ideal testing ground.

3.5 Engagement and proactivity

The message we're sending out today is that the levers currently available to unions limit their ability to intervene on issues of capital importance to their members. These mechanisms are simply insufficient to meet our challenges and ambitions for the sector. That is why we demand that the overhaul of the forest regime be tied to the creation of new, dedicated consultation mechanisms that foster the collective development of solutions and their implementation within a framework marked by greater transparency and accountability.

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Unifor, along with the other forestry unions in Quebec, want to play a proactive role in this redefinition process by raising labour issues and actively participating in the discussions aimed at increasing the sustainability of industrial forestry activities. We believe that if we can anticipate changes, we can also prepare the ground by planning and funding measures that will be both structuring and flexible, and that will benefit the workers and forest communities affected, rather than always having to pick up the pieces after each crisis.

Because it is fair to say that, up to now, the modus operandi of companies, governments and lobby groups has always been to relegate these considerations to the back burner and to demand or take action and measure the impact on people after the fact. While it is impossible, perhaps even undesirable, to plan everything in advance and avoid every pitfall, it is unconscionable to fail to take into account the human factor in decisions with such far-reaching consequences.

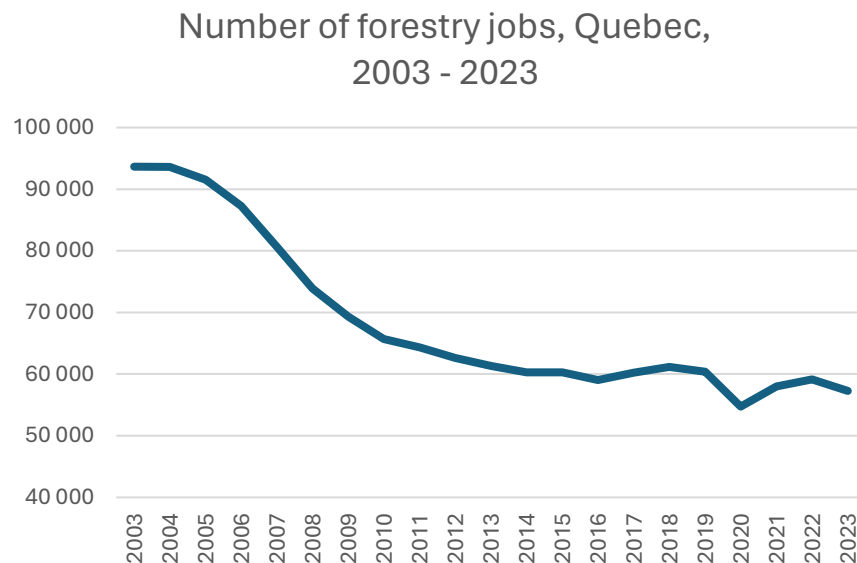
To further this objective, we can draw inspiration from what is being done elsewhere. Jurisdictions coping with similar issues are moving forward and engaging in a more productive dialogue from which Quebec should benefit. On March 13, 2024, Unifor and the other two major forestry unions held a summit⁹ in Victoria, British Columbia, at a time of unprecedented crisis in the province's forestry sector. The government sent a strong signal to the workers gathered for the summit, with the premier of B.C. delivering the keynote address. The Quebec government should draw inspiration from this kind of clear commitment to sustained dialogue with unions. The situation in British Columbia is dire. The slightly more favourable context in Quebec must not lull us into complacency.

4. BACKGROUND

Over the past few decades, forestry workers have been adversely affected by numerous transformations in the industry. Often painful and rarely planned in advance, these upheavals may not match the intensity of the boom-and-bust cycles seen in other natural resource sectors, but they do reflect a significant vulnerability to economic uncertainty and the cost of materials, not to mention the new and growing forces of disruption mentioned above.

4.1 Closures and attrition

The still recent closures of the Amos (150 jobs) and Baie-Comeau (250 jobs) paper mills, as well as the Fortress plant in Thurso (350 jobs), were very painful. They remind us of the precariousness of this sector and the disproportionate repercussions for the communities that host these activities. The uncertainty surrounding the sale of a portion of RYAM's assets in Témiscaming (800 jobs) continues to worry us, as does the indefinite suspension of operations recently announced at the Comtois sawmill in Lebel-sur-Quévillon (60 jobs), which notably supplies the nearby Nordic Kraft plant. These decisions have far-reaching consequences that extend well beyond these mill sites alone. Given the highly integrated nature of forestry activities, they have a crippling effect on an entire industrial infrastructure.



Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0202-01 (NAICS 11N, 322, 321)

Another reality, however, is that job attrition in the sector is not a recent phenomenon. In Quebec alone, over 30,000 forestry jobs, or nearly a third of all jobs in this industry, were lost between 2000 and 2010. Since the Great Recession of 2008 and the years of slow recovery that followed, we've seen a relative stabilization of job losses. Could it be that the resurgence of forest fires, restrictions on access to resources, the overcapacity in the sawmill sector cited by many stakeholders, changes in regulatory frameworks or the increased automation of production processes herald another major downturn? Many believe this is the case, but

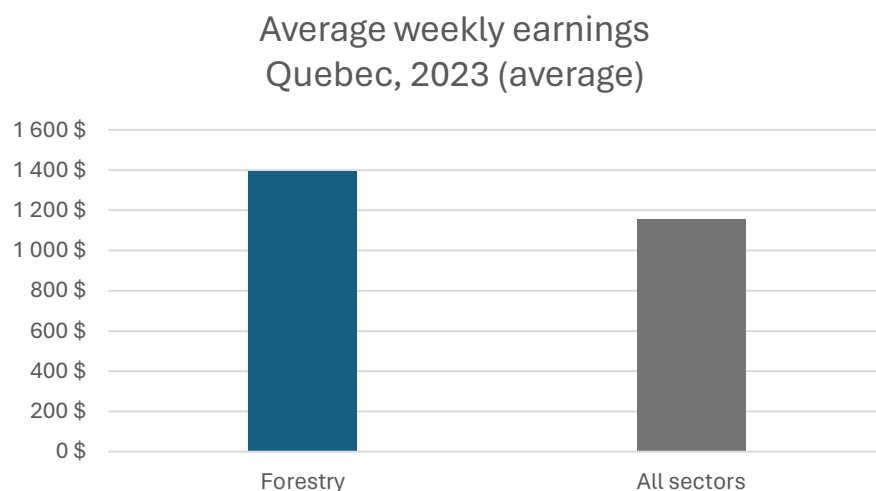
so far few have ventured to put a figure on it. This uncertainty weighs heavily on the minds of every worker active in the forestry sector today.

In this respect, the ambitious National Wood Production Strategy unveiled in December 2020 appears to be in serious trouble. Its forecasts for growth in the annual wood harvest by 2080 (from 29 million m³ to 53 million m³) and jobs (from 59,000 to 75,000) are being called into question. The Ministère des Ressources naturelles et des Forêts itself admits that “analyses are underway to reassess our ability to achieve these targets in light of new realities.”¹⁰

And yet, the strategy appeared to be based on a reasonable assessment of the risks. One of its targets was directly linked to the need to “increase the robustness of management strategies in the face of risk and uncertainty in the context of climate change.”¹¹ It also referred to the development of a Climate Change Adaptation Strategy. The public consultation on this strategy in the fall of 2021 still has not produced any concrete results, following the example of the caribou strategy. If the intentions appear to be good, could it be that the problem lies at the level of execution? Can we read into the Chief Forester’s message a suggestion that the laudable intentions expressed over the past few years have not translated – as least not quickly enough – into concrete, structuring proposals? One thing that’s certain is that these shortcomings add to the widespread feeling of unease.

4.2 Protecting good jobs

The forestry sector offers excellent jobs with good working conditions and remuneration. The strong union presence and the existence of mature collective agreements, which have consolidated the gains achieved over the last few decades at the cost of many struggles, deserve a lot of the credit for this state of affairs. In 2023, average weekly earnings for forestry jobs were close to \$1,400, over 20%¹² higher than the average for all economic sectors in Quebec. While this average masks wage disparities between sectors (salaries tend to be higher in pulp and paper manufacturing and lower in wood products manufacturing), it nonetheless confirms forestry’s relative advantage in the Quebec labour force.



Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0203-01

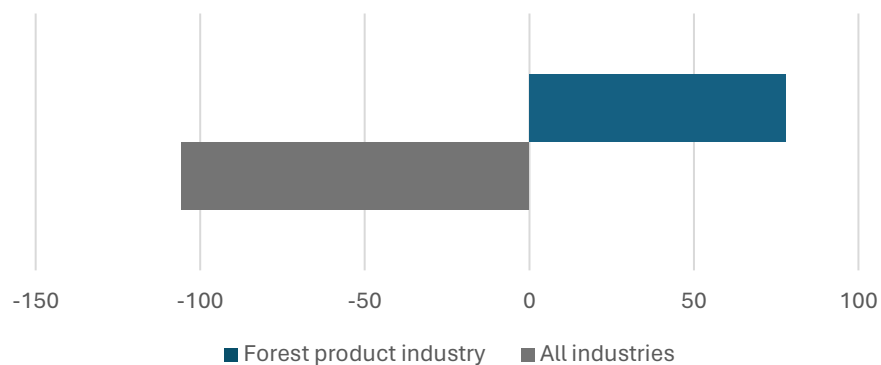
These good, mostly unionized jobs benefit the communities that host production sites – which are located in both urban and rural areas – as well as forestry operations. Their potential disappearance in a context of industrial transition and changing management practices gives rise to justified fears. In some cases, the disproportionate impact on communities that rely heavily on these jobs portends catastrophic scenarios. How would the 2,300 or so residents of the town of Témiscaming cope with the disappearance of a company that employs 800 of them? To ask the question is to answer it.

“This uncertainty weighs heavily on the minds of every worker active in the forestry sector today.”

That said, beyond the potential effects on more remote communities, from a union perspective, the issue of job quality is also important. The equivalence between a stable, well-paid and secure job and some of the temporary, seasonal and low-paying jobs (e.g., forest road closure work) that have been proposed may seem superfluous to some, who may view it as just another externality. We can confirm that this is not the case for the workers concerned.

However, the desire to protect these jobs in the long term should not be seen as an apology for a mono-industrial mode of development inherited from another era, or as an impediment to the deployment of other promising economic activities. We firmly believe that new projects aimed at enhancing the value of our forests, which would increase the resilience of our communities’ economic fabric while limiting environmental impacts, must be encouraged and supported. The development of these new markets can take place both in parallel and within the fold of an existing industrial base which, year in, year out, has generated a positive balance of trade in Quebec of almost \$80 billion over the past 10 years.¹³

Sum of the trade balance, Quebec
2013-2022 (billions of dollars)



Forest Resources and Industries in Quebec. Statistical Portrait, 2022. MRNF

4.3 New union benchmarks

In the current context, building a union discourse that advocates for defending the socio-economic interests of workers who earn their livelihood from the forest industry is not without its challenges. As citizens – including forestry workers – become better informed and more aware of the vulnerability of natural ecosystems, they are demanding higher standards in order to maintain their integrity. This new awareness is largely due to the extraordinary efforts of environmental organizations over many years. It is important to acknowledge the quality of their contribution to social debates and their influence on public policy.

As a labour organization, we maintain close ties with these groups and take into account their input in our deliberations. These perspectives combine with other lessons that we draw from the collective bargaining process that determines our members' working conditions. These are part of a pattern of labour relations in which companies play a central role. More and more, we are noticing that the often conflicting priorities of these two worlds tend to converge and occupy the same space.

“Unions are looking for benchmarks and seeking to update their positions. The difficulty is that they have to do so in a context that is highly polarized between [...] companies' desire for freedom from, and environmentalists' desire for expansion of, the constraints placed on the activities carried out in our forests.”

Unions are looking for benchmarks and seeking to update their positions. The difficulty is that they have to do so in a context that is highly polarized between what can be seen, in a slightly caricatural manner, as companies' desire for freedom from, and environmentalists' desire for expansion of, the constraints placed on the activities carried out in our forests. It's hardly surprising, then, that our vision tends, by force of circumstance, to lean towards compromise and to favour paths that preserve the socio-economic interests of the members to whom we have close ties by the very nature of our role. We are aware of the limits of this position. But we also believe that our role is to ensure that the proposals adopted are not disconnected from the reality of the workplaces and communities that play host to them.

4.4 Utility and durability

Quebecers' concerns about the forestry sector come at a time when the potential of the bioeconomy in the fight against climate change is becoming clearer. While we must remain particularly vigilant in the face of greenwashing, it is evident that renewable resources from our forests are poised to play a significant role as the movement to decarbonize and phase out fossil fuel inputs gathers steam. In this respect, Quebec has exceptional resources and could reap significant benefits in terms of innovation, economic spinoffs and climate diplomacy by becoming an international leader in this field.

We are also facing a context in which housing issues and the scale of the challenges affecting housing construction has reached a critical point. The need for housing is urgent, and it requires that a vast multi-year project be set in motion to address this need. What materials do we want to use to build these apartments and houses? The most desirable scenario involves the use of local wood products, combined with sound construction practices that notably integrate circularity strategies.¹⁴

The basic message is that industrial forestry has a place in Quebec. Should we reassess its impact on our natural environments, redefine its space and update its objectives? The answer is yes. The status quo is untenable. But we must do so while remaining aware that it meets basic needs and that alternatives would contribute to major ecological, economic and social setbacks for Quebec. The forestry industry is an essential economic lever, with all its qualities and shortcomings, that needs to adapt to a new reality, but that ultimately deserves to be preserved for its many valuable contributions to Quebec.

“The basic message is that industrial forestry has a place in Quebec. Should we reassess its impact on our natural environments, redefine its space and update its objectives? The answer is yes. The status quo is untenable.”

For us, the future of Quebec’s forests depends on how we respond to the following question: How can we maintain the integrity and protect the biodiversity of our forest, while at the same time deploying its extraordinary potential for the benefit of the people and workers who depend on it for their livelihood?

5. FOR SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT FOREST MANAGEMENT

Forest industry workers are directly concerned, impacted and interested by the scientific, technological and operational considerations underlying forest management approaches. Given their impact on available wood volumes, supply costs and associated industrial capacities, these approaches affect the productive capacity of forests and the viability of jobs. Faced with the current context of increased volatility, we are apprehensive about the effects of the adaptation measures that will be adopted, while recognizing their necessity.

5.1 Propositions des partenaires pour l'avenir de la forêt québécoise

To start, we would like to note that we endorse the *Propositions des partenaires pour l'avenir de la forêt québécoise* (proposals from partners on the future of Quebec's forests), which are the fruit of an unprecedented collective process initiated by the Ordre des ingénieurs forestiers du Québec that brought together academics, industrialists, environmentalists, unions and various associative bodies around the issue of the future of Quebec's forests. We agree with the main points that emerged from the discussions between these partners, including the need to redefine the governance underpinning our forestry regime, persistent shortcomings in terms of predictability and collaboration, and the importance of developing a concerted vision of the forest¹⁵ in light of accelerating global change. In this respect, the idea of creating an independent manager for each territory seems promising.

We got a sense from several stakeholders that the existing framework is not consistent with achieving true integrated management, and that gaps remain in the accountability of management decisions. Many pointed to the rigidity and complexity of the current mechanisms, resulting in a loss of coherence and wasted development opportunities. Criticism was also levelled at the assessment of risks associated with operations, perceived as lacking, and a planning system that does not contribute to the establishment of an investment-friendly environment, resulting in "... undue costs for all stakeholders, including the government, in addition to putting great pressure on the workforce."¹⁶

"Faced with the current context of increased volatility, we are apprehensive about the effects of the adaptation measures that will be adopted, while recognizing their necessity."

The increasing centralization of decision-making at the level of the ministry has also been criticized by many foresters, who are calling for an approach based to a greater extent on subsidiarity. A fair balance needs to be struck between government intervention in response to legitimate requirements, and the actions of forestry companies wishing to maintain their autonomy and operational coherence.

5.2 Research and knowledge acquisition

Research and the acquisition of knowledge on the effects of climate change on forests and forest wildlife habitats will be key to the management decisions made in the years to come. A strong emphasis must be placed on identifying both vulnerabilities (fires, forest pests, invasive species) and, by the same token, opportunities (new species suited to the future climate, more resilient to disturbance). Governments must not only ensure adequate and predictable funding for research activities, but also contribute to the establishment of an environment that fosters networking among key stakeholders (consultation forums, partnerships), thereby facilitating the transfer of knowledge to applied frameworks.

5.3 Toward a new management strategy

As the Chief Forester points out, we know that Quebec has a particularly extensive forest management approach and that little intensive silviculture is practised.¹⁷ However, the current situation is forcing us to change our practices in order to reduce the environmental footprint of forestry activities. What can we do to maintain the social, economic and environmental balance of the forestry sector and the ecological services provided by our forests? The answer to this question is not simple, but there are a number of possible solutions.

We believe that the idea of developing a spatially differentiated forest management strategy through appropriate land zoning, as put forward by the Chief Forester, opens up a range of possibilities and offers the flexibility required to support a more dynamic management approach. We see many advantages to this approach, which could potentially be combined with the networking of productive zones along the lines of the national forest network for wood production recommended by the Chief Forester in his advice published in 2017.

“By organizing the land on the basis of a variety of objectives, reflected in land zoning, it becomes possible to adopt different strategies for biodiversity protection and forest production along a gradient of intensity. Management strategies would then be based on opportunities and challenges, and the making of informed choices between them. This would make it possible to identify adaptation strategies that reflect what can be appropriately achieved in each part of the territory according to pre-determined priorities. In addition, the distance and cost of implementation, and ultimately the value of the goods and services to be produced or protected, must be included in the analysis. This will also make it possible to concentrate and secure forest management activities, act at the right time, better protect silvicultural investments and maintain the forest’s role in mitigating climate change.”¹⁸

5.4 Intensification

In the brief submitted by the QFIC during the consultation on the 2021 Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, the desired scenario is clarified by describing what a viable adaptation measure could look like, based on this networking principle and the intensification of wood production.

“By creating a network at a reasonable distance (within a 100 km radius, for example) from wood processing plants, close to road access and populated areas, we can better protect silvicultural investments against forest fires (human presence, early detection and rapid access to fire-fighting resources) and damage by insects and diseases (early detection, existing road access, greater flexibility for control and for pre-salvage harvesting before major tree damage occurs). In addition, the implementation of a short-distance management intensification network, close to public road infrastructures, potentially reduces the costs associated with forest road construction and maintenance, as well as timber transportation, providing additional flexibility to deal with unforeseen circumstances and maintain a competitive supply cost.

The creation of a wood production intensification network at a reasonable distance from mills and communities also makes it easier to attract and retain workers, as they can return home every evening. Moreover, the shorter distances involved in transporting workers and the timber volumes produced by these shorter-distance silvicultural operations will also help reduce GHG emissions attributable to the forest industry.”¹⁹

The use of this type of intensification measure is not necessarily a panacea. It also implies a lower ecosystemic value. However, it does have the advantage of relocating and concentrating forestry activities in the right place and ensuring greater predictability. The approach appears promising to us, but it would benefit from being adapted and enhanced by experts who could bring additional perspectives to issues of forest management. The design of such an intensive model should not be based solely on the needs of the industry, but rather requires the integration of a diversity of perspectives to provide a richer definition.

It will also be important to strengthen relations with the First Nations living on the territories concerned. Early indications²⁰ suggest that substantial efforts will be required in this regard. Changing the forest composition of ancestral territories cannot be envisaged without involving Indigenous communities.

5.5 Precautionary buffers

Pending the implementation of this shift towards intensification and, especially, the results produced, which will take decades to materialize, many issues remain unresolved. Some experts claim that, unless precautionary buffers are established, the overestimation of the volumes actually available for harvest could reach 25%, based on the risk of fire. If this is the case, they say it is risky to claim that current harvesting levels are sustainable. Their recommendation implies potential short-term costs, which they justify based on an analysis that integrates longer-term economic and operational factors. We believe that this risk management approach deserves careful consideration.

“ The main reasons for introducing a precautionary buffer are economic. Such a buffer would make it possible to avoid sudden drops in supply, which would undermine the industrial structure. The absence of a buffer means that, as fires occur, the impacts will become increasingly difficult to absorb, and the government will be forced to intervene repeatedly in catastrophic situations.”²¹

5.6 Making the most of timber

At a time when access to forest resources is becoming increasingly complex and, to some extent, scarce, it is important to ensure that harvesting practices maximize the recovery of timber. The recovery of forest residues and waste opens up interesting possibilities, which must be supported by an appropriate regulatory and pricing environment. Non-recyclable waste must be reduced to a strict minimum. We cannot afford to squander the resource. Given the anticipated increase in disturbances caused by agents such as fires and pests, more elaborate mechanisms to support the recovery of degraded woodlands also need to be considered.

5.7 Regeneration

Silviculture as a whole, and reforestation efforts in particular, have a key role to play in the adaptation of management practices. Given the rapid pace of change, we believe that a wide range of silvicultural scenarios need to be explored and tested. We subscribe to the idea of “making the regeneration project a large-scale testing ground that draws on the full range of expertise available in Quebec.”²²

Several promising avenues are already being explored. There is talk of using fast-growing species adapted to intensive regeneration on shorter rotations. Another idea is to develop silvicultural approaches based on hardwood species (birch, poplar) or jack pine, given its proven resilience to fire. Still others are exploring less costly regeneration methods, such as aerial seeding and the use of drones.

This is a major challenge, given that an average of 50,000 hectares of forest are planted annually in Quebec. The loss of a million hectares during the 2023 fire season alone and the budgets allocated by the MRNF give us an idea of the Herculean task ahead. As a result, these efforts will have to go hand in hand with actions that capitalize on the natural resilience of forests.

5.8 Resolving workforce issues in forest management

The scale of the reforestation project, and the likelihood that it will grow over the next few years, will require an abundant workforce. Will the supply of labour be adequate? The signals coming from the sector are worrying, to say the least. The sectoral diagnosis produced by the Forêt Compétences' Comité sectoriel de main-d'oeuvre (CSMO) for 2020-2021²³ noted trends that point to a decline in the number of available workers and major recruitment difficulties. More than half of respondents to the sectoral committee's survey reported a deterioration in their ability to recruit reforesters and brush cutters, while 46% anticipated an increase in retirements over the next three years. When we combine this data with the average age profile in the industry, which reveals over-representation in the 45-to-65 age bracket, the chances of meeting our adaptation targets appear seriously compromised. Solutions must be found to the current shortages. In concrete terms, this means redoubling our efforts to attract these workers by improving their working conditions and facilitating their access to training.

5.9 Increasing SOPFEU's resources

According to the estimates of the Quebec forestry industry council (QFIC), based on calculations made by the Chief Forester, the impact of the 2023 fire season on allowable cuts represented a value of \$13.5 billion.²⁴ To protect our forest assets, whether mature or undergoing regeneration, SOPFEU's early detection and fire suppression capabilities must be substantially enhanced. If "silviculture is essentially the only tool that will enable us to gradually adapt the forest to help it meet new challenges,"²⁵ and if reforestation budgets are to be increased, it follows logically that SOPFEU's resources and staffing levels must be adjusted accordingly.

These enhancements must not be aimed solely at increasing the auxiliary labour pool to deal with exceptional situations. It takes time to mobilize these resources on the ground, which can entail significant stand losses. Rather, efforts must be focused on increasing the number of fully trained firefighters, maintaining a network of logging roads providing access to the territory, and ensuring that operations centres located in forest zones have the capacity to act preventively or quickly on reports of fires in order to prevent their spread. These objectives cannot be achieved without resolving the issues of attracting and retaining forest firefighters. These workers are currently negotiating their new labour contract, and it is imperative that the government grant them better conditions of employment and pay.

5.10 Bureau de mise en marché des bois

Since the creation of the Bureau de mise en marché des bois (BMMB) (timber marketing board), has it met its initial objectives? The question is worth asking. Originally, the aim of the Bureau was primarily to break the deadlock in the softwood lumber dispute with the Americans. The idea was to demonstrate that harvesting from Quebec's public forest resources was managed according to a free-market logic, as opposed to a subsidized system that would be inconsistent with our trade obligations. More than 10 years later, we have to admit that the results have not lived up to expectations. The dispute is still ongoing, and the countervailing duties imposed on Quebec companies are among the highest in Canada.

It is also important to remember that the creation of the BMMB and the allocation of a guaranteed supply of 25% of timber from the public forest to a public auction mechanism has had a negative effect on the exercise and protection of the right of association for workers in the forestry sector. Reforms of the forest regime have a long history of disrupting union certification. The end of concessions and the introduction of forest management agreements (FMA) at the turn of the 90s led to a drastic drop in union coverage, from 78% to 28%. The situation deteriorated again with the creation of the BMMB, which caused a further drop from 28% to 18%. We believe that any reform of the forest regime must, at the very least, ensure that existing union coverage is not adversely affected, and ideally correct the current issues affecting the certification system by simplifying the exercise of the right of association and the management of labour relations.

6. FOR A MODERN AND DIVERSIFIED INDUSTRY

6.1 *Towards a more assertive industrial strategy*

After several decades in the doldrums, sectoral strategies (also known as industrial policies) have recently come back into favour with public decision-makers. The laissez-faire approach is no longer popular. We believe that the current context is conducive to the development of a more rigorous approach for Quebec's forestry sector. A more assertive, but nonetheless effective and targeted public intervention is needed to accompany the industry as it struggles to meet transition imperatives. While it's clear that private players have a central role to play, we believe that the government must help guide business decisions by defining its priorities and overall objectives (good jobs, added value, innovation, technology, value chain, etc.) with firmness and predictability. The basic idea is to create a pathway for industrial development that meets the demands of the people of Quebec.

Manufacturers want predictability. It's possible to offer them more of it while at the same time raising the bar in terms of economic benefits and environmental performance. To do so, the government has a toolbox of financial, fiscal, regulatory and commercial measures at its disposal, not to mention various other policy initiatives it can undertake to achieve its objectives. Some of these measures will take the form of incentives, while others will be more restrictive. In any case, clarity and stability must be at the heart of these interventions.

“The basic idea is to create a pathway for industrial development that meets the demands of the people of Quebec.”

6.2 *Conditionalities*

Given that any sums granted as part of the measures selected would be sizable and would directly benefit companies – at a time when public finances are already stretched thin – we expect any resources granted to be accompanied by a suitable system of conditionalities. In a context of strong corporate consolidation and business decisions that often prioritize short-term returns or share prices over other considerations, we must remain vigilant. These conditions could be linked to the quality of the anticipated spin-offs, but also to strict compliance with Quebec's industrial relations regime, particularly with regard to workers' fundamental exercise of their right of association.

6.3 *Diversification*

The current forest industry structure is closely tied to a sustained supply of softwood. These species will continue to play an important role in Quebec's forestry production ecosystem, but the adaptation measures envisaged in response to climate change point to an increase in the supply of hardwood, with potentially significant effects on infrastructure and production orientation. Some stakeholders are calling for an acceleration of this transition, which involves major changes to business models, equipment and the types of products that

will ultimately be manufactured. In their view, this is a calculated approach to managing a growing risk which, if not addressed immediately and progressively, promises a painful future, particularly for workers.

“It may be tempting to delay this transition and to continue to support the current business model by maximizing the level of softwood harvesting for as long as possible, despite the risks. However, such an approach will not allow us to avoid a transition that will take place sooner or later anyway. All it will do is bring us closer to the breaking point and the eventual collapse of the timber industry as we know it. This risk would loom over the heads of workers and make it very difficult to reorganize the industrial structure of forest communities. We believe it would be preferable to focus on a timber industry that is less dependent on softwoods, but whose sustainability is assured. This would establish a solid framework on which a more diversified and sustainable economic fabric could be built.”²⁶

This point of view implies a major and difficult shift that warrants exhaustive analysis. Over what time horizon could this transition take place? What are the logical and profitable transition scenarios that would enable companies to ensure the sustainability of their operations and the associated jobs? Increased use of hardwood species also opens up new production opportunities (reconstituted products, engineered products) that should be explored. Targeted, strategic interventions can contribute to the emergence of these opportunities, and they deserve to be proactively supported.

6.4 Focusing on secondary and tertiary processing

We support the widely accepted idea of accelerating the development of secondary and tertiary wood processing. These activities are associated with interventions that add value to products, generate proportionately more jobs and require smaller volumes of wood, which can lead to a reduced footprint on our forests. Secondary and tertiary production also has the advantage of being unaffected by the ongoing trade dispute with our neighbour to the south. That said, it should be noted that the forest industry’s three levels of processing are highly interdependent and form the basis of numerous, often complementary, value-adding systems.

6.5 Support for new production pipelines

We also support the exploration of possibilities for expanding new production pipelines based on forest biomass (particularly residues and waste). These can help increase the resilience of the sector as a whole, open up avenues of industrial use with strong structuring potential, and even contribute to decarbonization efforts.

After a difficult start, the forestry residue-based biofuel sector appears to be taking off in Quebec (Bioénergie AE, pyrolysis oil). The same applies to the production of biochar (Carbonity, Airex), which results from the carbonization of woody biomass and offers a broad range of applications. A number of other bio-based products (e.g. nanocrystalline cellulose) are used to manufacture a wide variety of products (pharmaceuticals, electronics, etc.) and could support promising business segments.

6.6 Creation of forestry clusters

There is strength in unity. The development of forestry clusters bringing together a greater number of operators, or the creation of integrated production sites encompassing a wider range of activities, could help to strengthen complementarity and resilience to market cycles. The presence of several entities in close proximity can encourage exchanges, fuel innovation and increase attractiveness. This is an avenue worth exploring, as many of today's forest communities have characteristics that would favour their establishment.

6.7 Promoting the use of wood products

Quebec has a vested interest in encouraging the use of wood products in the residential, commercial and institutional construction sectors. Besides just walking the talk, only a more restrictive regulatory environment combined with greater awareness among construction professionals and technologists will enable us to achieve a significant increase in the use of wood as a material. Unveiled in 2020, the *Politique d'intégration du bois dans la construction*,²⁷ a sort of wood charter 2.0, marks a step in the right direction by putting forward objectives aimed at changing regulations in Quebec. We also need to work on Quebec's construction culture by encouraging the architects and engineers who are at the heart of building design and material decisions to change their methods and learn to work with wood products.

7. PUTTING A HUMAN FACE ON TRANSITION

7.1 Towards a global framework for transition support

It is our hope that this reflection process on the future of our forest will provide an opportunity to establish new, innovative approaches to transition support. Quebec as a whole will benefit from more sustainable forest management practices. It goes without saying that the burden of this transition, which will have a greater and more direct impact on certain workers, must be borne collectively. It's easy to make decisions when it's other people's daily lives and jobs that bear the brunt of the repercussions. The actions we take to achieve our objectives cannot be fair and equitable if they fail to take this into account.

“It's easy to make decisions when it's other people's daily lives and jobs that bear the brunt of the repercussions. The actions we take to achieve our objectives cannot be fair and equitable if they fail to take this into account.”

While we welcome the programs that are already in place, we need more coherence, a broader scope and greater emphasis on the mechanisms to put in place to meet workers' needs. To achieve this, we need to give workers a seat at the table and the capacity to act. The importance of strengthening this dimension lies at the heart of our position.

7.2 Vision and guiding principles

This work begins with a reminder of some of the basic principles underpinning our demands. The position we are advocating for is based on the *Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All*,²⁸ developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO). These principles, relevant excerpts of which are reproduced here, are primarily rooted in a vision based on sustainable development and the active engagement of the world of work in devising solutions:

“Sustainable development means that the needs of the present generation should be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development has three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – which are interrelated, of equal importance and must be addressed together.” [...]

“Managed well, transitions to environmentally and socially sustainable economies can become a strong driver of job creation, job upgrading, social justice and poverty eradication. Greening all enterprises and jobs by introducing more energy and resource efficient practices, avoiding pollution and managing natural resources sustainably leads to innovation, enhances resilience and generates savings which drive new investment and employment.”

“Sustainable development is only possible with the active engagement of the world of work. Governments, employers and workers are not passive bystanders, but rather

agents of change, who are able to develop new ways of working that safeguard the environment for present and future generations, eradicate poverty and promote social justice by fostering sustainable enterprises and creating decent work for all.”

These principles also offer guidelines on how governments should deploy their actions in their main policy areas and implement their institutional arrangements.

Social dialogue and tripartism:

“a) actively promote and engage in social dialogue, at all stages from policy design to implementation and evaluation and at all levels from national to enterprise level in line with applicable international labour standards most relevant to the just transition framework, to forge consensus on pathways towards environmental sustainability with decent work;

b) promote the creation, development and formalization of dialogue mechanisms and structures at all levels to discuss the best means to implement national social, economic and environmental goals.”

Industrial and sectoral policies, in consultation with social partners:

“a) set goals for the continuous improvement in the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the sectors and design sectoral policies and programmes in line with the specific conditions of each sector and the types and sizes of enterprises operating in it;

b) foster effective social dialogue at the sectoral level to promote consensus building and social acceptance for the successful implementation of social, economic and environmental policies including, but not limited to, climate change;

c) also in consultation with other stakeholders establish incentives, mandates and, where necessary, regulations to stimulate demand, investment and development of markets for goods and services in sectors and subsectors that are relevant for the greening of economies;

d) use policy instruments for market creation and incentives in a stable, predictable and transparent manner, give clear signals to investors, minimize market and price distortions, encourage innovation and ensure effective use of public resources;

e) pay special attention to the industries, regions, communities and workers whose livelihoods might experience the hardest impacts of the transition; [...]

g) formulate accompanying policies through social protection, including unemployment insurance and benefits, skills training and upgrading, workforce redeployment and other appropriate measures to support enterprises and workers in sectors negatively impacted by the transition to sustainable development.”

Two key ingredients can be seen to emerge from these principles. Firstly, there must be **political will**, which must be embodied in the actions of the main government stakeholders. Secondly, there must be a **structured space for consultation and empowerment** in order to enable the development of impact mitigation strategies and targeted support for affected workers. This space must be fueled by social dialogue and its actions must be characterized by transparency and accountability. The presence of organized workers who benefit from union representation, as well as employers, with the substantial means at their disposal, is essential to ensure that this work moves forward.

7.3 Diversity of needs

The diversity of transition trajectories in the forestry sector will give rise to different contexts and types of needs. These trajectories may follow more or less long cycles (e.g., gradual transfer of harvesting activities to intensive areas, impact on industrial practices due to changes in species composition, etc.) or much shorter cycles (e.g., mill closures following bankruptcy or a business decision, loss of access to the resource due to fire, etc.). Also, each location, whether a community in a remote region or a production site close to major centres, is different and deserves an adapted response. Finally, the attributes of the workers involved (age, qualifications, etc.) are also an integral part of the equation.

7.4 Mitigation of impacts

First of all, in implementing solutions and alternatives, we believe the goal should be to limit the negative effects of anticipated or ongoing disruptions and, if possible, rebuild *in situ* forest industry activity on a sustainable basis. This approach can take a variety of forms, including reviewing supply arrangements, pooling with other production sites, granting temporary subsidies for transport, carrying out analyses with a view to diversifying or converting production, carrying out market studies, developing projects aimed at increasing added value, setting up a financial framework involving public and private resources, etc.

7.5 Targeted support for affected workers

Despite the scope and quality of these preventive interventions, unmitigable impacts may remain, whose effects may still be felt by workers. We have seen certain transition scenarios lead to significant attrition or even closures. No one wants this to happen, but we need to be prepared. To deal with such circumstances, concrete support measures must be deployed, particularly at the level of economic security and support for reintegration. If we accept the premise that the burden must be borne collectively and not individually, because the results benefit the entire population, it follows that substantial resources must be made available to workers.

In concrete terms, this means that the approach to transition support must ensure that financial repercussions are kept to a minimum, by providing a compensatory supplement to EI payments, which cover only part of workers' salary, and by maintaining comparable employee benefits for the duration of the transition effort. In the case of older workers for

whom reintegration in the job market is more difficult, equivalent bridging measures must be offered.

At the same time, additional assistance should be provided to support the relocation of affected workers – if they are willing and able to do so – by facilitating access to jobs in companies in other regions and by supporting the costs associated with their relocation, including moving costs and property sales. Access to training and new education pathways (whether in forestry or in other sectors) must also be facilitated and financial support provided for the duration of studies. Concrete assistance and service measures include: individualized training plans, competency profile assessments, specific structures aimed at accelerating or facilitating skills recognition or transferability, deployment of a training offer adapted to new value-added activities, etc.

Finally, to support remote communities that are more isolated or heavily dependent on the activities of a forestry company, tax assistance and additional programs aimed at maintaining the supply of public services could prove necessary.

7.6 Forestry Transition Office

At present, the public sector's capacity to deal with the transition challenges affecting the forestry workforce is insufficient, and available resources are scattered. We believe it is necessary to pool these resources and better define their focus. Such an approach would strengthen our capacity to take proactive and preventive action, while facilitating the implementation of remedial strategies.

The creation of a Forestry Transition Office could take the form of a pilot project under the aegis of the MRNF, in close collaboration with other ministries (notably employment, the economy and education), and should include a tripartite consultation mechanism. The organization should have adequate decision-making and operational capacity and a sufficient budget envelope to achieve its goals. In the initial phase, its scope could be limited to one or several forest regions bordering the northern limit, before being extended to other regions. The establishment of such an office would also provide an opportunity to channel and strengthen the action of the CPMT's partners (CSMO, CRPMT) and initiatives (e.g. Pôle d'expertise sur la transition verte).

The Office's functions could include:

- Monitoring developments and risks associated with the various sectors of the industry, based on regional contexts and management and production strategies;
- Serving as a point of convergence and coordination for the work of stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of impact mitigation strategies linked to an industrial transition or a specific event.
- Consolidating and refining the analysis of labour market information according to the specificities of the sector and regions concerned

(shortages, job risk profiles, wage levels, nearby employment opportunities, etc.);

- Accompanying affected workers by ensuring their access to support measures and identifying gaps between transition needs and available resources;
- Producing analyses on an ad hoc or conjunctural basis, with the collaboration of experts (risk analysis, portrait of emerging trends, collection of best practices, evaluation of the effectiveness of support measures, etc.).

The Forestry Transition Office could also oversee the creation of an intervention team modelled after the Rapid Response Teams²⁹ (RRTs) set up by the U.S. government, with expertise focused on supporting hard-hit communities. In the United States, these teams intervene in communities impacted by the effects of the energy transition. They coordinate the identification and use of public support resources, act in collaboration with local stakeholders and provide dedicated technical assistance to address immediate needs as well as longer-term economic transition strategies. A similar formula, adapted for Quebec's forestry sector, could prove highly useful in the event of the closure of a production site in a remote community, or following a major loss of forest resources due to fire or infestation.

7.7 Council of Forest Partners

In order to maintain social dialogue and create a space where all forestry sector stakeholders can come together and engage in lively debate, rather than wandering from summits to national roundtables and other ad hoc exercises, we believe it would be beneficial to set up a Council of Forest Partners. The work carried out by the Partenaires pour l'avenir de la forêt québécoise (partners for the future of Quebec's forests), created by the Ordre des ingénieurs forestiers du Québec, as part of the current reflection process, has shown us that it is possible for several organizations with divergent interests to arrive at a consensus and identify actionable priorities. The mandate of this inclusive body, which would bring together public decision-makers and leaders of civil society organizations, could be to work with government to develop, oversee the implementation of and assess the impact of a sectoral strategy.

7.8 Transition fund

The establishment of a fund dedicated to financing transition initiatives would ensure greater transparency in a context where support measures depend almost exclusively on the public purse. This tool could also be linked to new funding mechanisms, according to terms to be defined, which would involve a contribution from the entities that benefit from the exploitation of Quebec's forest resources. It is also conceivable that, if a protocol enabling the production of forest carbon credits on the regulatory market were to be established for public land, it would at the very least be appropriate to explore the possibility of a contribution to the transition fund.

7.9 Federal government support

Bill C-50, the federal government's *Sustainable Jobs Act*,³⁰ is expected to go before the Canadian Senate shortly. Introduced on the heels of the interim Sustainable Jobs Plan,³¹ the bill is part of the federal government's effort to move forward with a policy agenda that recognizes the transition efforts underway in many industrial sectors, the need to preserve good union jobs, and the importance of social dialogue. Eventually, five-year action plans are envisaged, with significant budgetary envelopes. Without accepting encroachment on its own areas of responsibility, we believe that it would be in the Quebec government's best interest to monitor the progress of this work and request access to these funds as part of its forest transition efforts.

8. CONCLUSION

Quebec is facing a reform of its forest regime. Unifor members want to see the creation of a model that is sustainable, equitable and strategic. First and foremost, the new forest regime must ensure the implementation of a more sustainable approach to forest management in a context of climate volatility. This approach must be supported by a more assertive industrial vision that is better aligned with the constraints on our forests' ecosystems. Finally, we demand that this plan recognize the global stakes involved in the transition and the multiple impacts on workers and that it foster the contribution of all stakeholders through social dialogue.

The consultation process opened a space for productive exchanges and the gathering of information while taking into account of the diversity of issues on a regional basis. Despite our criticisms, we would like to salute the work of the MRNF in this process of reflection on the future of the forest. It's a good start. The question now is what will become of the many observations and potential solutions that have been formulated? Is this the beginning of an ambitious and inclusive process, or is it the end of an exercise whose contents will be distilled in a vacuum?

The members of Unifor reiterate their desire to see the emergence of an open development process that actively seeks the engagement of all communities. This can only be the first step in a more long-term dialogue. We must act quickly. Let's do it together.

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²⁹ Interagency Working Group on Coal & Power Plant Communities & Economic Revitalization, “Rapid Response Teams (RRTs)”

<https://energycommunities.gov/technical-assistance/rapid-response-teams/>

³⁰ Parliament of Canada, *An Act respecting accountability, transparency and engagement to support the creation of sustainable jobs for workers and economic growth in a net-zero economy*

<https://www.parl.ca/legisinfo/en/bill/44-1/c-50>

³¹ Natural Resources Canada, “Sustainable Jobs Plan: An interim plan for 2023-2025 detailing concrete federal actions to advance economic prosperity and sustainable jobs in every region of the country

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