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Backgrounder: B.C.'s old-growth forests are in crisis

B.C.'s old-growth forests, particularly those with trees that are hundreds of years old and as tall as skyscrapers, are among the rarest ecosystems on the planet. Temperate old-growth rainforests never covered more than half a percent of the planet's land mass, but the majority has long been logged and converted into young forests never allowed to grow old again.

Logging companies have always targeted forests with the biggest trees first. As a result, old-growth ecosystems with very big trees are the most endangered—reduced to a fraction of their former extent—and least protected. Conversely, old-growth ecosystems with fewer, smaller trees in higher elevations have a higher percentage remaining and protected.

A Sierra Club BC analysis of government data shows that in the last full ten year period (2009-2018) the average annual logging for old-growth was approximately¹:

- 15,200 hectares in coastal B.C.
- 126,000 hectares in the Interior

The loss of B.C.'s last old-growth forests is threatening plants and animals, land rights of Indigenous peoples, carbon storage, and environmental services like clean air and clean water. Species that depend on old-growth forests cannot survive in young, even-aged forests.

Increased conservation and more stringent forestry laws are urgently needed to ensure communities have clean water and clean air as a basis for a diverse economy, including tourism and recreation. These steps are critical to reduce the damage from worsening climate impacts such as droughts and flooding.

Moving away from destructive practices such as clearcutting must be part of provincial climate action to increase the amount of carbon stored in forests.² This will translate into more jobs and less damage per cubic metre of wood harvested. Protected areas and logging regulation must be in compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The NDP's 2017 election platform included a commitment to act on old-growth, promising to take an evidence-based scientific approach and use the ecosystem-based management of the Great Bear Rainforest as a model. The provincial government, however, has not yet taken meaningful action for endangered old-growth. Instead, in the latest example of business as usual³ in October the BC government increased the annual cut for Tree Farm License 61 on Southern Vancouver Island by 11.5 %, an area at very high ecological risk with very little remaining old-growth forest.

In January 2019, the province asked environmental organizations working on old-growth for input to inform amendments to B.C.'s *Forest Range and Practices Act* (FRPA), scheduled to be legislated in the spring of 2020.⁴ In July 2019, twenty-eight non-governmental organizations⁵ and many concerned citizens provided extensive input for increased conservation and improved forest management,

¹ Figures include all forests older than 140 years and, in the Interior, also lodgepole pine forests older than 120 years

² <https://sierraclub.bc.ca/7-myths-about-forests-carbon-and-climate-change/>

³ <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2019FLNR0260-002085>

⁴ <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/govtogetherbc/impact/forest-and-range-practices-act-results/>

⁵ <https://sierraclub.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/FRPA-Joint-ENGO-Submission.pdf>

implemented with the urgency demanded by the climate crisis. In a report⁶ for Sierra Club BC, the University of Victoria’s Environmental Law Centre called for minimum protection for all old-growth ecosystems across the province to be included in FRPA amendments.

Separately, also in July 2019, the B.C. government announced a new panel⁷ to gather feedback from British Columbians on old-growth forests. However, recommendations from this panel will not inform the FRPA amendments, they will not be shared until late 2020, and there is no commitment to bringing them into law. Without immediate conservation steps and commitments to implement the recommendations, this new process will result in a “talk and log” situation of ongoing old-growth forest destruction.

Sierra Club BC and other environmental groups are calling for bold action by the provincial government to protect and restore endangered old-growth ecosystems through new Indigenous Protected Areas and stricter regulation, before intensifying climate impacts like drought, wildfires and storms—coupled with destructive logging practices—further exacerbate pressure on ecosystems.

The climate emergency and forestry jobs crisis requires the province to shift fossil fuel subsidies away from fracking and LNG terminals to forest conservation and improved forest management. The Province must restore government capacity, invest in restoration and reforestation and support communities and companies that want to switch to improved forest management and value-added wood products, creating more jobs and less damage per cubic metre of wood.

⁶ <https://sierraclub.bc.ca/university-of-victoria-environmental-law-centre-report-calls-for-a-minimum-of-thirty-per-cent-old-growth-protection-across-bc/>

⁷ <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2019FLNR0255-002033>