

Ontario to protect vast tract

July 15, 2008

KERRY GILLESPIE
QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

Ontario has made the largest conservation commitment in Canadian history, setting aside at least half the Northern Boreal region – 225,000 square kilometres – for permanent protection from development, Premier Dalton McGuinty announced yesterday.

It's an area almost the size of the United Kingdom.

"It is, in a word, immense. It's also unique and precious. It's home to the largest untouched forest in Canada and the third largest wetland in the world," McGuinty said.

The announcement is globally significant in the fight against climate change, advocates say. Nearly 100 billion tonnes of carbon are stored in the Northern Boreal region and another 12.5 million tonnes are absorbed each year.

These lands remain, for the most part, untouched by development. But with increasing world demand for resources, it was just a matter of time before mining and logging inched up from the south.

Now, those resource industries will be barred from half the land and have to work with the government and local First Nations communities to create sustainable development plans for the rest, McGuinty said.

Over the next 10 to 15 years, the province will work with scientists and communities to map out the specific lands that are the most valuable as carbon storehouses and for species protection and which lands have the greatest resources and should be developed.

"We're going to strike the right balance between conservation and development," McGuinty said. In the interim, the government is relying on prospective developers' respect for



PETER GORRIE/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Ontario plans to preserve boreal forest in northern Ontario, seen in this 2006 photo. The area to be preserved is one and half times the size of the Maritimes.

1

Rank of the boreal forest – a worldwide band of conifer-dominated trees that stretches across Scandinavia, Russia, Alaska and northern Canada – compared with other terrestrial ecosystems in terms of how much freshwater (in wetlands and lakes) and carbon (in trees, soil and peat) it stores.

200+

at risk species of animals make their home in the Northern Boreal region, including the

the laws governing Crown and First Nations lands to protect the region's forests and wetlands.

The government will introduce legislation in the fall to reform the outdated mining act so all future mine developments will need approval of local First Nations, which will get a share of the revenues.

"We get to say to our aboriginal communities: if there is some mining exploration here, and you permit that, you get a piece of the action," McGuinty said, adding that the government would give them a cash down payment this fall.

Conservative and NDP critics accused McGuinty of throwing a wrench into the \$11 billion mining industry, when Ontario's struggling economy can least afford it, simply to score cheap political points for being seen as a green premier.

But the Ontario Prospectors Association welcomed the announcement, saying it agreed some conservation was needed and that the mining act changes would bring needed certainty to the industry.

Environmental groups were also thrilled, calling the announcement visionary.

"The premier has shown leadership, which we hope will set the tone for forest protection across the country," said Gillian McEachern of ForestEthics, which has spent three years trying to get Ontario's far north on the radar of southern-focused politicians and media.

"(Protecting half) is the most we've ever seen a government leader commit to," she said.

At 22.5 million hectares, the protected area dwarfs other provincial conservation efforts, including the 2.4 million hectares protected under Lands for Life and the 728,000-hectare Greenbelt in southern Ontario, said Janet Sumner, executive director of the CPAWS Wildlands League. "It's quite bold, but it's actually what the science requires," Sumner said.

Last year, 1,500 scientists from more than 50 countries called for the protection of Canada's boreal forest, one of the largest intact forest and wetland ecosystems left on earth. To make sure the ecosystem thrives requires that at least half of it be protected, they said.

Equally important yesterday was McGuinty's announcement about reforming the mining act to ensure development doesn't go forward without support from native communities and revenue sharing with them, Sumner said.

"That's going to be a new day and that's what we need," she said.

Right now, the land is steeped in controversy, with First Nations pitted against mining

wolverine, woodland caribou and endangered bald eagle.

450,917 sq. KM.

the area of the Northern Boreal region, or 43% of Ontario's land mass, extends north from roughly the 51st parallel and includes both boreal forest and the Hudson Bay Lowlands.

12.5 MILLION TONNES

of carbon dioxide is absorbed each year by the Northern Boreal region – about 2 per cent of the 583 million tonnes Canada generated in 2005.

21.5%

of Ontario's entire area, or 225,000 sq. km. of the region – a tract more than 30 times the size of the GTA – will be protected under the province's plan.

Sources: Ministry of Natural Resources, Royal Ontario Museum

companies. That has resulted in several high-profile cases of native leaders facing fines and jail time for trying to keep the mining industry off their traditional lands.

The Northern Boreal region covers 43 per cent of Ontario but few people call it home. About 24,000 people, mostly in native communities accessible only by air, live there. It is home to approximately 200 sensitive species of animals, including woodland caribou, wolverine and lake sturgeon, which have been driven from large parts of the more southern forest by logging and other development.

The massive intact wilderness, one of few remaining on Earth, plays a vital role in helping species adapt to climate change.

The NDP believes in protecting the environment, sustainable development for the North and revenue sharing for First Nations, but New Democrat MPP Gilles Bisson said he didn't think yesterday's announcement amounted to much on any of those fronts.

"They're talking about a 10- to 15-year process ... We're not really talking about doing anything any time soon," said Bisson, who represents the far north riding of Timmins-James Bay and is making a run to be his party's next leader. "This could end up being a free for all for staking before the rules are basically determined; this could mean that there will be no new exploration going on ... and everything in between. That's the problem." A rush on staking in the Far North won't be a problem, said Garry Clark, executive director of the Ontario Prospectors Association.

"There's no road access. It's either float plane or helicopter access. It would cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars to go and randomly stake, and if you don't do any work on it in two years you lose the claims," he said. Besides, the industry has been in a boom in recent years, he said. "If it's good looking rock, we've already staked it."

There are about 6,000 mining stakes in the Northern Boreal region, according to ForestEthics.

But none of those, or any in the future, will be developed without government and local First Nations approval under the revamped mining act, the government said.

"On a go-forward basis, what we are saying is that in the far north, there will have to be local use plans in place that permit exploration," McGuinty said, referring to the plans to be drawn up for the half of the Northern Boreal region where development will be allowed.

The mining industry has "been growing at a healthy clip. We don't want to compromise that, but we do want to ensure that our mining efforts in the province of Ontario are respectful of Ontarians, aboriginal and non-aboriginal alike," he said.