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Clear-cutting raises concerns

In the South Nation Conservation watershed, treed land dropped by 25,000 acres in 16 years

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A clear cut area in North Glengarry Township is an example of increased land clearing in eastern Ontario

Embrun – Ontario Trillium Foundation seed money is being sought to finance an eastern Ontario coalition of organizations which would serve as consultants in making farmers and developers more aware of the impact of clear-cutting and the value of regional forests.

"In some cases, a properly managed forest might be worth more to farmers than a corn crop," said Dennis O'Grady, general manager of Finch-based South Nation Conservation (SNC) and a leader of the coalition. "We have to crunch the numbers and show them the value."

In the case of developers clear-cutting to make way for new homes, they can command a premium by building in gladed subdivisions, O'Grady said.

The coalition approach is in response to growing concern across Eastern Ontario about the gradual loss of crucial forest cover to expanded croplands and residential development.

Winchester area landowner and business person Kathleen Millar says the pace of "rip-and-tear" has reached fever pitch.

"Trees, woodlots, ground water, and natural habitat are not valued in this region," Millar said, suggesting that her comments could get her vilified as "anti-landowner, anti-farmer, anti-logger, anti-golfer and anti-developer, a naïve tree-hugger with no sense of reality."

"The prevailing attitude is that these lands are a hindrance to growth and income. There won't be a tree left standing at this rate, and the thought of what we're leaving for future generations to deal with is horrifying."

Russell Township activist Cindy Saucier was shocked to discover that a grove of trees near her home was being ripped out without warning.

"One minute, we were successful in getting a deer crossing sign in front of those woods," said Saucier, vice-chairperson of the township environmental committee. "The next minute, the same forest was being cut down."

She plans to bring the issue of restrictive bylaws to the committee, hoping that township council will take action to limit tree cutting and require replacement and other remedial measures when it occurs. Neighbouring Clarence-Rockland enacted such a bylaw in 2005, prohibiting clear-cutting in parts of the municipality.

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The concern is backed by statistics from SNC which manages a 4,000 square-km watershed extending from north of Brockville to the Ottawa River near Plantagenet.

O'Grady indicated that, between 1991 and 2007, forest cover in the watershed dropped by 25,000 acres. That's a loss of three per cent from the previous cover of 24 per cent. International experts have set 30 per cent cover as the benchmark needed to sustain wildlife.

The numbers are more favourable in the Raisin Region Conservation Authority watershed which lies between South Nation and the Quebec border. Cover there stands at an erratic 36 per cent, said Chris Critoph, manager of environmental services. While cover is high is some RRCA sub drainage areas, it's too low in others.

For the most part, trees being razed across the region are being sold as logs or firewood, chipped, or burned on site. A typical site is located in North Glengarry Township south of Dunvegan where every tree is being recycled as area farmers legally expand their growing land.

Denis Pommainville, mayor of La Nation, a lawyer and member of a prominent farming family, became concerned when 75 acres in his municipality "just disappeared". He called on colleagues on Prescott and Russell counties council to take appropriate action to protect forest cover and make sure it remains viable for flora and fauna.

Cautioning that property owners shouldn't be blocked from cutting a single tree when necessary, Pommainville insisted that developers can't be allowed to cut down "acres and acres of forest." Random clear-cutting, he warned, could lead to a "huge catastrophe."

He suggested regulations which would oblige developers to offset clear-cutting: "If a developer clears 50 acres, it would be logical that he reforests 50 acres."