

Forestry Referendum Commentaries: Three Perspectives on where to go from here

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Common Sense over Politics is the Answer

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The voters of Maine defeated the Green Party's anti-forestry referendum question at the polls in November. In the process, the governor's "compact" also was denied victory. In both cases, I am happy. The potential implications of the clearcutting debate go far beyond the science of correct forestry. At stake are such core values as private property rights, the role of government, and common sense. All three were threatened by both 2A and 2B. A vote for 2C, the existing Forest Practices Act, was the correct choice for Maine's natural resources, Maine's economy, and Maine's political process.

I consider myself to be an environmentalist. My family's local business, Hancock Lumber, has been managing timberland since 1848. I am part of the sixth generation of my family to participate. We are caring for woodlands today upon which pine seedlings will need eighty to 100 years to grow to maturity. I object to the anti-forestry activists claiming the title of "environmentalists" and labeling the rest of us "industry." I believe I am the environmentalist.

The citizens' initiative to "ban clearcutting" represented bad forestry and bad public policy. In fact, option 2A wasn't even really about clearcutting. Clearcutting was a surrogate. Clearcutting was the equivalent in this debate to the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest. In the Pacific Northwest, radicals have fought to close all federal land to all timber harvests. To do so, their strategy was to identify a surrogate cause to which the public would be sympathetic. They chose the image of a clearcut.

Option 2A is about clearcutting as a political term, not a forestry term. Nearly every professional forester in America will tell you that the components of 2A represent ridiculous forestry. A basic mistake the founders of the Compact for Maine's Forests made was to believe the debate was really about clearcutting. In fact, the founders of the compact made a number of fundamental mistakes in accessing the ban clearcutting referendum. First, and most importantly, they thought it might win. This is an important point to emphasize. The compact only came into existence as a reaction to 2A. Had early polls showed the ban clearcutting referendum doing poorly, 2B never would have existed. Option 2B, therefore, also is about politics, not forestry.

Second, 2B organizers viewed the ban clearcutting movement as a one-time event. As a result, they incorrectly thought they could defeat it once and for all. They failed to see this debate within the context of the national radical environmental movement. Finally, they actually helped

validate the 2A proposal by incorrectly conceding that our forests were mismanaged and needed to be rescued. Lost in this whole process was common sense.

Let me explain the 2C position by speaking about our forests in nonpolitical terms. Let's talk about the facts that cannot be refuted. Maine is the most heavily forested state in the nation. Every other state in the union--including the likes of Alaska, Oregon, Montana and New Hampshire--has fewer trees per acre than Maine. Maine has more trees today than it did twenty-five, fifty or 100 years ago. Maine's forests are growing, not shrinking. In addition, Maine already has one of the most aggressive sets of state laws on the books today to protect its forests. The existing Forest Practices Act in our industry is considered to be comprehensive and protective. That is not to say the existing Forest Practices Act is perfect. Like everything else, it could be improved. However, it is a good example of deceptive politics at work when the founders of the compact attempt to label the 2C position as the "do-nothing option." The 2C position is not the "do-nothing option." It is the common sense option.

The 2C position may be summarized as follows:

"Defeat the Green Party's referendum on its own lack of merit. After the election, if anyone can show where the existing Maine Forest Products Act can be improved, we are the first in line to support it."

Sounds too simple, doesn't it? Forestry never was designed to be an A, B, or C multiple-choice decision. 2C supporters advocate defeating 2A and then, whenever appropriate, working within our system to continue to improve and evolve the existing laws.

Looking forward, it is important to make sure we see the forest through the trees. The real issue on the table is private property rights and the proper role of government in regulating those rights. Most Mainers who own a home bought property that used to be forest and was cut, sold, and subdivided. Homeowners clearcut their property to erect a house (made of wood) and grow a lawn. The question is how do you selectively restrict private property rights and individual freedoms?

Clearcutting is a surrogate. As a sixth-generation lumberman managing forests in southern Maine on an eighty- to 100-year life cycle, I can assure you that our industry is already well-regulated. The existing Forest Practices Act, shoreland zoning, wetlands protection acts, town zoning, and other regulations currently place tremendous pressure on being able to retain and manage profitably working forests for the long term. If maintaining forests is a citizens' priority in Maine, why do we want to make the process more difficult for the very people who grow trees for a living? Why don't we want to encourage and support landowners who work to preserve the heritage of our forests?

From here, it is my hope that we will put politics aside and focus on good forestry, limited government, and reasonable freedoms for landowners. Most of the leaders of the 2B movement now would like to see 2B defeated. The most likely scenario is the passage of a set of amendments through the Legislature to the existing Forest Practices Act that are sensible, concise, and focus strictly on the unorganized territories, not the entire state. These amendments

will be initiated by former 2B supporters. Then, a united industry, government, and mainstream environmental coalition will appeal to the voters to defeat the compact on the grounds it no longer is necessary.

Let me close with a common-sense example that puts the absurdity of the entire debate into perspective. We all acknowledge the rights of the farmer. The farmer cuts down all his trees and works hard his whole life to prevent new trees from growing back over his fields. Why, in the guise of protecting our forests, do we challenge and restrict the timberland owner who cuts down some of his trees and works his whole life to grow them back?

Common sense over politics is the answer.

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