



BUSINESS & ECONOMY

N.B. maple syrup, timber firms in sticky debate

The New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association wants the provincial government to nearly double the amount of public land for its industry.

Photo: Courtesy of The New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association

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Maple syrup production in New Brunswick set another record last year, but the industry says its growth has been sapped by the provincial government, which won't offer more healthy old stands of maple trees on public land.

According to Statistics Canada, New Brunswick produced 811,000 gallons of syrup in 2022, up from 786,000 the year before. That's a 3.2 per cent hike in the world's third-largest maple syrup making region in the world, after only Quebec and Vermont.

But Louise Poitras, the executive director of the New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association, says the local industry has little room to grow further, despite selling all its annual product by November, mostly for the lucrative export market.

She blames the Tory government for not showing the same consideration to its 150 members as the province's powerful timber lobby that wants to cut down more trees.

The forest industry, meanwhile, says there's room for co-existence and co-operation and that the maple producers are asking for too much.

For three years, the association has been pushing to have nearly double the allocation on Crown land for more maple syrup production, from more than 14,000 hectares to close to 27,000 hectares.

“We find there’s a double standard here,” Poitras said in an interview Monday. “Timber rules here in New Brunswick. We’re having a hard time finding our voice because we’re not even listened to. When we ask about setting up more production on Crown land, government officials say, ‘it’s coming, Louise, just be patient, Louise.’ And I say, ‘three years?’ The producers are waiting, the banks willing to lend them money for improving production are waiting. That’s not a government that has maple syrup at heart.”

But the natural resources minister and the timber industry said Poitras had mischaracterized a complex, sticky situation.

Mike Holland argued his government wasn't ignoring the maple syrup producers and showing preference to wood-cutting firms.

Late last year, the minister announced the finishing touches on a conservation plan that doubled the amount of protected land and inland waterways, from five to 10 per cent of all Crown holdings.

He also told the forest industry in 2019 he was putting a five-year moratorium on the annual allowable cut.

“If there’s a perception that the forestry industry is receiving greater and better attention than the maple syrup industry, your next call should be to Forest NB,” Holland said. “They’ll tell you their situation is similar to the maple sugar folks. They want more woods and can’t get more.”

Officials in his department, he said, were stretched over the last three years because the conservation plan was his number one priority, but they continue to work regularly with the maple syrup producers to find middle ground.

He cautioned that timber companies have binding agreements to use Crown land. And although maple syrup production is a light industry, the minister is reluctant to open protected spaces to it because it would require thinning of the forest canopy to be more productive.

The timber industry pointed out that the most recent figures show the province's maple syrup industry employed just 2,300 seasonal and part-time workers in 2017, with sales of \$13 million. By contrast, New Brunswick's forest industry provided jobs to 24,000 New Brunswickers, both directly and indirectly, the majority in year-round, higher-paying jobs that created \$1.7 billion in economic activity.

Kim Allen, executive director at Forest NB, says her industry can't cut in areas of potentially high maple production according to the government's policy. But she said handing over the entire additional 12,600 hectares for maple syrup production – much of it near Moncton and Bathurst – would be economically foolish.

“If put into syrup production, this area will result in a loss of already strained hardwood supply for several major employers,” Allen said in a release. “The forest industry is meeting obligations with partial harvesting in areas near current maple leases. We assume the department is considering options for additional future leases, and we will watch how they balance the expansion ambitions of one party with maintaining raw wood supply for the other. Ultimately, pitting industries against one another is counterproductive – there is room for co-existence and co-operation.”

For his part, Holland said he hoped to have good news for the maple syrup industry before the end of the year, without making any promises on the amount of land the government might provide.

Poitras said the announcement should be sooner rather than later.

“It only takes three minutes to cut down a maple tree that takes 75 years to grow,” she said.