

# Commentary: Spruce budworm - New Brunswick's biggest climate threat

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A spruce budworm  
Photo: Submitted

The Healthy Forest Partnership is an Atlantic-wide group of researchers, governments and industry, who are working together to implement an innovative early detection and treatment method to respond to the serious threat of a spruce budworm outbreak.

Many of us remember the last major outbreak of spruce budworm in New Brunswick, during which 3.6 million hectares of forest were affected. The social, economic and environmental impacts were significant and felt over decades.

Quebec continues to deal with an outbreak that began in 2009. Their reactionary approach to management has resulted in a severe outbreak that covers seven million hectares of forest in varying stages of defoliation and mortality. To put this into context, seven million hectares is an area roughly the size of the entire province of New Brunswick. Healthy Forest Partnership research activities show encouraging signs of being able to manage an outbreak and mitigate the spread to New Brunswick and the associated significant forest losses.

The loss of millions of hectares of working forest in New Brunswick is of very serious concern to members of our industry – the economic impacts alone are estimated at close to \$7 billion.

But equally important is how an outbreak stands to impact our province's climate change action efforts.

Our forests provide significant storage capacity for carbon and when trees die, they release carbon dioxide. Under a scenario where millions of trees die during a severe spruce budworm outbreak, those greenhouse gas emissions add up to a serious threat to the climate change action objectives that, as a province, we are working so hard to meet.

A recent analysis conducted by David MacLean of the University of New Brunswick for the Healthy Forest Partnership found that a severe spruce budworm outbreak in Atlantic Canada would release over 60 million tonnes (60 megatonnes) of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions into the atmosphere.

To put the New Brunswick portion of these emissions into perspective, we would need to take 44 per cent of all the cars in the province off the road, for 30 years, just to offset the emissions from a severe spruce budworm outbreak in the province.

As we consider options for a carbon pricing solution, keeping our forests healthy and continuing to capture and sequester carbon is very advantageous. Forests could provide a source of tradable offsets for emitters under a cap and trade system. At peak carbon pricing of \$50/Mt (as set by the federal government in its Pan Canadian Climate Change Framework) and with budworm related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of 60Mt, there is a potential risk of losing out on qualifying tradeable offsets if they are not protected.

As we think about how we best address our climate challenge, we must not limit our view to only the emissions today that must be dealt with. A spruce budworm outbreak could easily cancel out much of the hard work being done to achieve our targets. No matter where your interests lie, be they environmental, commercial, recreational or traditional forest use, I believe we all share a common goal of protecting our forests. We must therefore work together and do everything in our power to guard against a spruce budworm outbreak by making forest protection one of our highest climate change action priorities.

**Mike Legere** is the executive director of Forest NB which is the voice of forests and forestry in New Brunswick.