

In New Brunswick, opposing forestry industry practices can be dangerous for your career | CBC News

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Glyphosate has become key to sustaining New Brunswick's vast forestry industry, but some advocates say that those who have raised concerns about the herbicide have been unjustly punished for it. Now, one college instructor has filed a wrongful dismissal suit, alleging he was fired from his forestry college because of his critical views.



Rod Cumberland was the New Brunswick government's deer biologist for 15 years before teaching at the Maritime College of Forest Technology in Fredericton. On Nov. 18 he filed a lawsuit for wrongful dismissal from the college. (Radio-Canada)

Along Restigouche County's Route 180, in northern New Brunswick, is a perfectly arranged silhouette of conifer plantations, put in sharp relief by a setting sun.

But this forest is cultivated, and the political battle around it has come to define much of the political conversation in that remote part of Canada.

At issue is [glyphosate, a herbicide](#) sprayed by forestry companies on many of the province's forests.

The chemical has become a key part the province's forest economy, but it is also the subject of several lawsuits in Canada and the U.S. [alleging it is to blame for health risks](#), such as some forms of cancer.

[Health Canada disputes those claims](#), saying, "No pesticide regulatory authority in the world currently considers glyphosate to be a cancer risk to humans at the levels at which humans are currently exposed."

When forests are clear cut, hardwood species often outcompete coniferous trees, which are favoured by forestry companies. Glyphosate kills off those hardwoods, allowing coniferous trees to dominate.

Eighty per cent of the forest harvest on public lands in New Brunswick is done by clear cutting. About one-third of that clearcut land is sprayed with glyphosate.

- [Grooming forests could be making fires worse, researchers warn](#)

But those who oppose these forest industry practices can sometimes pay a heavy price.

A college instructor and longtime critic of glyphosate was recently fired from a forestry college and has filed a wrongful-dismissal suit. Another university professor lost a post on a scientific panel when he opposed forest industry practices.

Other scientists suffered similar consequences.

"The industry's goal is to make money, and we feel that it might be at any cost," says Francine Lévesque, a member of the group Écovie.

The environmental advocacy group was one of the backers of a 2018 petition calling for the end of glyphosate spraying that was one of the biggest in New Brunswick history. It garnered 34,000 names and was tabled in the provincial legislature.



Francine Lévesque is with Écovie, a New Brunswick environmental group. Her family also runs a canoeing adventure company on the Restigouche River. The goal of the forestry industry 'is to make money, and we feel that it might be at any cost,' she says. (Gil Shochat/Radio-Canada)

The use of chemicals such as glyphosate is the least costly and most efficient way to maximize productivity, says Mike Legere, executive director of Forest NB, an industry group.

"There are two camps, and people are ideological. There is a certain perception of the forest, and it's hard to change people's minds," he said.

- [\\$500M class-action lawsuit launched against Roundup makers](#)

Concern over deer food

Rod Cumberland was the New Brunswick government's deer biologist for 15 years before going on to work at the Maritime College of Forest Technology, a forestry school in Fredericton.

While in government, he became convinced that glyphosate was destroying the deer's food — mostly deciduous trees and shrubs. This meant that their numbers on Crown land were declining.

"What we spray in one year will feed over a third of the current deer herd," said Cumberland. "That's 32,000 tonnes of food, the equivalent of 300 dump trucks."

Cumberland was attacked most notably by J. D. Irving (JDI), the province's biggest forestry company. JDI

said his claims were "irresponsible and are not supported by current data and scientific research."

The company did not answer questions from Radio-Canada's program *Enquête* for this story.

Last June, [Cumberland was fired from his teaching position](#) at the Maritime College of Forest Technology, where he worked for seven years.

Among the reasons he was fired was "undermining the content of the seminar on the Science of Vegetation Management."

"It sounds so convoluted," Cumberland said, but "that's my perspective on glyphosate."

He filed a lawsuit on Nov. 18 for wrongful dismissal. The college declined to comment.



The Maritime College of Forest Technology told Gerald Redmond his services were no longer needed the day after he criticized Cumberland's firing. (CBC)

Gerald Redmond, a former executive director of the Maritime College, who until recently taught there part-time, [said he was pressured by the school's board of directors](#) to punish Cumberland for his positions on glyphosate. After speaking publicly to defend Cumberland, he was told this summer that his services were "no longer needed."

"The right thing to do is to ban glyphosate as quickly as possible from our spraying on our forests," Redmond said. He wants an investigation on "the influence of the forest industry on the firing of Rod Cumberland at the Maritime College of Forest Technology."

The Canadian Association of University Teachers says [the academic freedom of both teachers has been violated](#) and that they were denied due process. The province's Green Party has called for an investigation.

The case is reminiscent of the 2015 [dismissal of the province's chief medical officer](#), Eilish Cleary. She was removed while she was investigating the use of glyphosate. The government said her removal was a personnel matter.

Another scientist targeted

Biologist Marc-André Villard spent more than 20 years studying bird species in the Acadian forest. His research as a professor at the Université de Moncton led him to a clear conclusion: intensive forestry in New Brunswick has an impact on its biodiversity.

"Some bird species avoid conifer tree plantations," Villard says, making those spaces less biodiverse.

In 2014 the government increased the amount of conservation forest, public land aside for wildlife habitat, that logging companies would have access to.

Villard felt the government had gone too far. He spoke to CBC Television, arguing against the new agreement. He worried about what an increase in conifer plantations would do to overall forest health.

Villard's statements did not go unnoticed. He was a member of J.D. Irving's scientific advisory committee but lost the position after he spoke up. He also lost research funding which he received from JDI.

"The company doesn't accept certain points of view and wants to control what is said publicly, even if one has academic freedom as a professor," Villard said. "This is not accepted by the company."



In New Brunswick, clearcutting is the primary technique used by the forest industry to cut wood on public lands. (Gil Shochat/Radio-Canada)

With growing opposition to glyphosate, forestry companies are defending their practices.

"It's amazing how poorly informed people are about this," says Legere, the industry spokesperson. The provincial government, working with the big forestry companies, set up forestinfo.ca, meant to "share resources and information about forest management."

But critics say the site is biased in favour of industry. For example, the site uses toxicologist Len Ritter, an emeritus professor from the University of Guelph and an expert on the impact of pesticides on human health.

[Ritter has been criticized](#) for his pro-industry views including his position on pesticides.

The Monsanto Papers — documents released as a result of U.S. litigation against the pesticide manufacturer — made several references to Ritter.

He was described as someone who "delivers the interpretations and the messages that we want to put forward on this subject" as well as someone who could "defend [Monsanto's] product," glyphosate.

Ritter did not respond to emails from *Enquête*.

Researchers from the federal Department of Natural Resources are also featured on the site, which fails to mention that some of their work has been funded by glyphosate manufacturers like Monsanto, as well as by J. D. Irving.

Banned in Quebec

Quebec is the only province that bans all herbicides in forestry management. Their use has been replaced by physical clearing of land.

"It's populism," says Legere, who accuses herbicide opponents of being blind to the evidence of glyphosate safety.

"Not at all, we did our homework," says Luc Bouthillier, former commissioner of the Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement (BAPE) the public hearing body, which recommended banning the use of pesticides over Quebec forests. The measure took effect in 2001.

The BAPE heard from the agrochemical industry, foresters, environmentalists, public health experts and regular citizens.

"It was clear that there was a concern held by a majority that seemed real and manifest. It was also well-founded," the former commissioner, who is now a professor of forestry policy at Laval University, said.

The ban, he says, has contributed to the development of new methods of forest management and reflects a social consensus in the province.