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B.C. is flunking on old-growth forests, environmental report card says

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The B.C. government is failing to enact recommendations to protect large old growth trees like those pictured above in a Vancouver Island cut block. Photo by TJ Watt.

Premier John Horgan is getting failing grades when it comes to protecting B.C.'s old-growth forests, according to a report card issued by a coalition of environmental groups on Thursday.

The report card evaluates the province's progress at the six-month mark after its promise to act on 14 recommendations outlined in a [report that followed a strategic review](#) of B.C.'s old-growth forestry practices.

Most urgently, the province grades poorly around the call to take immediate action to protect at-risk old-growth and stem the loss of rare ecosystems, said Andrea Inness, a campaigner with the Ancient Forest Alliance (AFA), which issued the report card along with the Wilderness Committee and the Sierra Club BC.

"They committed to act immediately to temporarily halt logging in the most endangered old-growth forest ecosystems," said Inness.

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"The province still has a very, very long way to go to actually implement that critical recommendation."

When the government [announced it would adopt a new approach](#) to old-growth management in September, it temporarily deferred logging in 353,000 hectares of forest in nine regions until a new plan was developed.



Andrea Inness, of the the Ancient Forest Alliance (AFA), said the B.C. government is not acting on its promise to act on recommendations to protect at-risk, old-growth forests. Photo courtesy of Ancient Forest Alliance

However, various environmental groups and reports have questioned how much of the government's deferred areas actually included at-risk, high-value, old-growth ecosystems, Inness said.

"Those deferrals were highly problematic," she added, noting the most at-risk areas of old-growth valued in terms of biodiversity were not protected.

"They've really exaggerated that a lot to make it sound like they've done more than they have," Inness said.

Much of the [forested areas covered in the government's deferral](#) fell within a number of parks, ecological reserves, or included already existing deferrals or poor grade timber and low-value ecosystems not at risk of logging, Inness said.

Only about 415,000 hectares of old-growth forest with big trees remain in B.C., mostly without protection, [according to an independent report](#), Inness said.

"We try to look at this data and have determined that only 3,800 hectares of that 353,000 deferral was actually previously unprotected high-risk old-growth forests," Inness said.

As such, clear-cutting will continue in critical old-growth stands — such as the Fairy Creek watershed on Vancouver Island — destroying their bio-diverse ecosystems forever, she said.

Activists [blockading logging activity in the Fairy Creek watershed](#) near Port Renfrew for the last seven months got a [temporary reprieve](#) after an injunction hearing to oust them was adjourned last week.

"It would send a very strong signal if Premier Horgan announced within this three-week timeframe that (government) is going to set that forest aside," Inness said.






"Because, that would be consistent with what he's promised to do."

BC Government Old-growth Report Card

Date: March 11th, 2021

Premier: John Horgan

Last fall, Premier John Horgan made a big promise. He pledged his government would implement the old-growth panel recommendations 'in their totality.' The recommendations, which government received in April and published September 11th, follow a three-year (including short-term actions) and call for a paradigm shift to make ecological integrity and biodiversity the top priority. This report card grades how the government is doing six months after committing to this paradigm shift.

SUBJECT	PROGRESS	GRADE
Immediate action for at-risk forest (deferrals within 6 months)		D
The old-growth panel calls for immediate interim protection of the most at-risk old-growth to prevent the loss of rare ecosystems. To date, government's deferrals only include about about 3,800 hectares, or less than 1% of the most at-risk old-growth. Logging continues in much of the remainder, and critical old-growth stands are being lost forever. To improve this grade, the BC government must immediately defer logging of all at risk old-growth in the province.		
Three-year workplan with milestone dates		F
The old-growth panel recommendations are embedded in a three-year framework with six month steps, starting with immediate action for at-risk forests and engagement with Indigenous governments, followed by a transition plan, a new framework prioritizing ecological integrity and alternatives to clearcutting. To date, the BC government has not tied its implementation promise to a work plan with milestone dates. Without such a step, the BC government remains unaccountable, meaning First Nations and forestry-dependent communities cannot count on support through the transition.		
Funding for implementation, First Nations and forestry transition		F
Significant provincial funding to support economic alternatives for First Nations and to enable a transition in the forest sector is fundamental to the successful implementation of the old-growth panel recommendations. This includes immediate funding to support First Nations seeking temporary economic relief while logging deferrals are put in place, as well as support for forestry workers. The BC government has yet to announce any funding commitments whatsoever, jeopardizing the success of many of the panel's recommendations. To improve this grade, it must immediately allocate funds to meet both short-term and long-term needs to secure Indigenous-led long-term conservation solutions and economic alternatives to old-growth logging.		
Change course and prioritize ecosystem integrity and biodiversity		F
The old-growth panel's call for a paradigm shift to prioritize conservation and management of ecosystem integrity and biodiversity across sectors requires an immediate course correction. This requires giving direction to statutory decision-makers like the chief forester and district managers to execute these priorities. As a first step, the BC government must immediately introduce delayed amendments to provincial forestry laws prepared prior to the pandemic.		
Transparency and Communication		F
The old-growth panel stressed the need to improve transparency and communication about ecosystems and forest management in order to rebuild public trust. Unfortunately, the government's communication around its response to the report has been inaccurate and misleading. The government has further alienated the public and jeopardized this process from the outset by classifying its initial measure as "353,000 hectares of old-growth protected" when much of this area is not old-growth and much of it is forest that is already protected. To get to a passing grade, government must correct misleading information and quickly share accurate data on how much at-risk old-growth remains unprotected and report on progress without false claims.		



An environmental report card on the B.C. government's protection of old-growth forests, created by Ancient Forest Alliance, the Wilderness Committee and the Sierra Club BC.

The report card suggests that the province is also failing to adequately chart a new forest approach that prioritizes the integrity of ecosystems and biodiversity as called for by the review plan.

During the October election, the [NDP election platform](#) committed to meeting the old-growth strategic review recommendations and protecting more old-growth forests — in addition to the original deferral — in collaboration with First Nations, labour, industry and environmental groups.

And the province also committed to protecting up to 1,500 individual, giant and iconic trees as part of its special tree regulations when announcing its forest deferrals.

While the government has initiated conversations with First Nations around old-growth forestry, other steps need to be taken to fulfil the old-growth recommendations, Inness said.

The new B.C. budget is slated for April and the province should commit funds to support First Nations experiencing economic losses due to forestry deferrals or when choosing to protect ancient forests, she said.

"Until that economic piece is addressed, it could be very difficult for First Nations to agree to temporarily halt logging or permanently protect old growth in their territories if there aren't alternatives," Inness said.

Additionally, the province has failed to tie its implementation promises to any timeline, nor has it signalled whether it's on track to come up with a provincial transition plan within the next six months that prioritizes ecosystem health as promised, she said.

Should the government make good on its promises to enact old-growth strategic review recommendations, it involves a complete paradigm shift in the way forests are managed, Inness said.

"It means putting biodiversity and ecosystem integrity ahead of timber supply," she said.

"But (the province) isn't showing that they understand that. In fact, it feels more like they want to maintain the status quo."

Comment from the office of the B.C.'s Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development was unavailable before the *National Observer's* publication deadline.

Rochelle Baker / Local Journalism Initiative / Canada's National Observer

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Working to protect BC's endangered old-growth forests and ensure a sustainable, second-growth forest industry.

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