

Exceptional Forest Ecosystems in Québec

Action Framework in the Private Forests



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Privately-owned Exceptional Forest Ecosystems

A Priority for the Ministère des Ressources naturelles, de la Faune et des Parcs

Québec's forests contain a variety of ecosystems, most of which are fairly common. However, there are also other forest ecosystems that are rare, that shelter threatened or vulnerable plant species, or that are composed of old-growth forests. Ecosystems such as these are considered to be exceptional forest ecosystems (EFEs). Privately-owned land in southern Québec hosts more than half of all potential EFEs even though it accounts for only 8% of Québec's total area.

Preservation of biological diversity, including exceptional forest ecosystems, is a requirement of sustainable forest management, and is stipulated

in the Forest Act. Although responsibility for protecting EFEs lies primarily with the landowners concerned, the Ministère des Ressources naturelles, de la Faune et des Parcs (MRNFP) intends to do whatever it can to understand and promote the protection of these ecosystems.

This Action Framework sets out the MRNFP's objectives and describes the steps it intends to take to promote the conservation of privately-owned EFEs, with due consideration for the rights of landowners. It proposes a balance between EFE preservation and the interests of woodlot owners and suggests ways of achieving it.

A “forest refuge” is a forest that shelters one or more plant species that have been designated as threatened or vulnerable¹ or that are likely to be so designated, or that contains a remarkable population² of one such species.



¹ The expression “threatened or vulnerable species” as used here refers not only to species recognized in the Act respecting threatened or vulnerable species (R.S.Q., ch. E-12.01) but also those appearing on the list of species likely to be designated as threatened or vulnerable, published in *La Gazette officielle du Québec*.

² A “population” is a grouping of several individuals of a same species on a given site.

1 The Context

1.1 Privately-owned EFEs

There are 375 privately-owned EFEs in Québec, covering a total area of 12,774 hectares, for an average of 30 hectares per EFE. More than half (51%) of all Québec's EFEs are privately owned, but they account for only 20% of the total EFE surface area.

Privately-owned EFEs exist in 16 of the 17 areas covered by regional agencies for private forest development, as well as in the territories of the Laval RCM and the Montreal Metropolitan Community. The Montérégie (35%) and Outaouais (16%) agencies head the list in terms of both the number of ecosystems and the total area.

Some types of EFEs found in the forests of southern Québec are located almost exclusively in the private woodlots. For example, 95% of EFEs in the sugar maple-bitternut hickory and sugar maple-basswood domains are privately owned, as are most of the EFEs (75%) considered to shelter threatened or vulnerable species. The handful of privately-owned old-growth forests in Québec also contain unusual forest types or forests that are not part of protected areas.

In addition, only 12% of privately-owned EFEs – mostly university sites and regional or municipal parks – are protected in conservation areas.

1.2 Woodlot owners and EFE conservation

An EFE may belong to one or more owners. In many cases, the owners are farmers or certified forest producers. However, a large number of EFEs belong to companies working in the forest industry and other sectors, and to municipalities, RCMs, Hydro-Québec, teaching institutions and various other organizations.

The action framework described here depends on the willingness of woodlot owners to preserve privately-owned EFEs. Its purpose is to identify and promote opportunities for voluntary preservation.

1.3 Protection requirements for EFEs

In some cases, exceptional sites must be preserved in their entirety in order to conserve their exceptional features. This would be the case for old-growth forests and some rare forests. However, in other types of EFEs, development initiatives may be possible on certain conditions. Depending on the issues at stake, a case-by-case analysis may show that certain operations would be respectful of the site's exceptional features. In other situations, analysis may prove that maintenance of the site's integrity is the only possible conservation option. This Action Framework promotes maintenance of EFE integrity as the primary choice, and the application of mitigating measures as a second choice.

2 In-depth Knowledge of EFEs

2.1 Confirmation of sites

The MRNFP has undertaken a number of surveys based on specific criteria to confirm the exceptional nature of proposed EFEs. It intends to continue with this work in order to complete its confirmation of all proposed sites, and will also evaluate new proposals from forestry sector stakeholders.

2.2 Scientific recognition of privately-owned EFEs

It is the responsibility of the MRNFP to recognize the exceptional nature of sites. Recognition depends on certain biophysical criteria. The Department gives the woodlot owner a descriptive record of each site. The existence of a recognized EFE on private land does not place any legal obligation on the landowner.

2.3 Establishment of special protective measures

The MRNFP provides detailed expertise for forestry consultants, project proponents and woodlot owners by characterizing EFEs and establishing potential protective measures ranging from complete protection to the application of mitigating measures to preserve the site's exceptional features.

In many cases, it will be sufficient to pinpoint exactly where the EFE is located and simply avoid that portion of the woodlot when carrying out forest operations. The MRNFP will submit EFE identification criteria to the individuals and organizations involved in financial support measures, so that they are able to set the perimeters of EFEs on site. It may be necessary to obtain expert assistance, especially for sites containing threatened or vulnerable species.

Protective Measures for EFEs		
Complete protection	— No interventions — Localization and circumvention of the site	— Requirement in old-growth forests — First choice option in rare forest ecosystems and shelter forests
Mitigating measures	— Localization and establishment of a perimeter or protective strip — Winter work — Special marking	— Second choice option for rare forest ecosystems and shelter forests

3 Adjustment of the MRNFP's Financial Assistance Programs

3.1 Mandatory protection of EFEs when seeking financial assistance

EFE protection will become a mandatory requirement in the MRNFP's financial assistance programs. The principal programs affected by this measure are the:

- *Private Forest Development Program*
- *Property Tax Refund Program for Certified Forest Producers*
- *Forest Resource Development Program*
- *Forest Job Creation Program.*

In the specific case of the *Private Forest Development Program*, it will be up to the regional agencies to make the necessary adjustments.

Many different stakeholders are involved in the implementation of these programs, including forestry consultants, who will be required to inform their clients of the existence of EFEs on their property. The MRNFP will therefore make sure forestry consultants have the information they need (location and description of EFEs) to do so.

3.2 Support for the regional agencies

Every regional agency for private forest development will be required to incorporate EFEs into their protection and development plans and into the *Private Forest Development Program*. The Department will provide technical support to help them establish their priorities for action, which will include informing and training forestry consultants, adapting the silvicultural guide and informing woodlot owners, among other things.

A “*rare forest ecosystem*” is defined on the basis of the particular combination of plant species it contains, its structure, or its location. It is “rare” in the sense that it presents a set of specific ecological conditions, or because most ecosystems of the same type have been destroyed by human activities.



4 Promotion of EFE Protection in all the MRNFP's Actions

4.1 Involvement in decisions

The MRNFP is consulted on the subject of RCM development plans and applications for permits from the Commission de protection du territoire agricole du Québec (CPTAQ). It is also consulted on the creation of ecological reserves, the designation of threatened or vulnerable species, and the adoption of legislation or regulations originating in other government departments. It will apply the elements of the Action Framework to all these consultations.

4.2 Preparation and implementation of an information and awareness strategy

Informing woodlot owners of the existence of EFEs is the first step in the conservation process. Many owners will not be receiving financial assistance through MRNFP programs, and will therefore not be informed of the presence of EFEs by their regional agencies or forestry consultants. Information on EFEs provided by the MRNFP have already encouraged some woodlot owners to commit to the conservation process.

The MRNFP will implement an information and awareness strategy aimed primarily at large corporate landowners and farmers whose land includes EFEs. In the latter case, the MRNFP will work jointly with the Ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation (MAPAQ).

An “old-growth forest” is a forest ecosystem in which the dominant trees are past their maturity, taking into account the area in which they are growing. Old-growth forests display specific dynamics. They typically contain aging and dead trees of various sizes, and tree trunks in various stages of decomposition lying on the forest floor. They show little sign of having been affected by human activities in recent decades.



4.3 Provision of expertise to different agencies

The Ministère de l'Environnement (MENV) has already taken steps to ensure the protection of sites located on private land. The Nature Conservancy now owns nearly 8 km² of natural sites in Québec. The Quebec Society for the Protection of Birds owns a fair share of one of Québec's largest shelter EFEs. Other agencies are also involved in the conservation of private sites. The MRNFP will contribute at the biophysical level, by recognizing EFEs covered by conservation projects.

Another Step Toward Sustainable Forest Management

Privately owned EFEs make a vital contribution to the biological diversity of Québec, and efforts are required to protect them. The ministère des Ressources naturelles, de la Faune et des Parcs intends to support landowners by continuing its EFE identification work and by raising owner awareness of EFE issues. It will adjust its financial assistance programs to ensure compliance.

The preservation of EFEs will help maintain the range of ecosystems and species characteristic of Québec's forests. Conservation of biological diversity is one of the six criteria for sustainable forest management, and is stipulated in the Forest Act. By protecting its EFEs, Québec is therefore promoting the sustainable development of its forests for the benefit of present and future generations.

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