

May 16, 2024

Honourable Tim Houston, Premier
Office of the Premier
PO Box 726
Halifax NS B3J 2T3

Dear Premier Houston:

The Nova Scotia Regional Committee of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), is a collective of approximately 100 physicians and health professionals from across Nova Scotia. We are deeply concerned about the interconnected crises of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, and the negative health effects these are having on our patients and communities.

As physicians, we have been grateful for the prioritization of health care by our current government. However, it is important to also recognize that our healthcare system is only a small component of what impacts the overall health of our population.¹ The living conditions and ecosystems into which we are born, grow, live, work and age make up the key determinants of our health.^{2 3} These conditions provide the basic foundation to a physically and mentally healthy population. It is this foundation that our government needs to safeguard for Nova Scotians today, and into the future. Therefore, we are also pleased that there has been a commitment by our government to protect 20% of Nova Scotia lands and waters by 2030.⁴ We trust that further protection of our most ecologically intact and biodiverse forests would be seen as a natural extension of these efforts to support the health and well-being of all Nova Scotians.

While this environmental policy commitment is a positive step forward, there is concern among citizens and conservation groups that without a thoughtful and evidence-based plan in place, what little remains of our old forests is at risk of disappearing. Therefore, we support the Save Our Old Forests (SOOF) Campaign, which calls for a *“pause on all harvesting and road building activities in forests over 80 years old on Crown land until such time as protected areas meeting the 20% target have been designated.”*

¹ Public Health Agency of Canada. Chief Public Health Officer of Canada’s Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2023: Creating the Conditions for Resilient Communities: A Public Health Approach to Emergencies. Ottawa, ON: Public Health Agency of Canada; 2023.

² Solar, O, Irwin, A. A Conceptual Framework for Action on the Social Determinants of Health. Social Determinants of Health Discussion Paper 2 (Policy and Practice). Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization; 2007.

³ Marmot, M. Achieving Health Equity: From Root Causes to Fair Outcomes. The Lancet Global Health. 2007; 370(9593):1153-63.

⁴<https://novascotia.ca/nse/progress-report/#:~:text=The%20Environmental%20Goals%20and%20Climate,of%20life%20for%20Nova%20Scotians>

More frequent and extreme weather events have made the reality of climate change much more palpable across our province. Adverse health impacts from our changing climate are now a reality in Nova Scotia. Poor air quality from wildfire smoke, vector borne diseases like Lyme Disease, harmful algal blooms, eroding coastlines, and flooding damage to critical infrastructure reminds us that the climate crisis is also a health crisis, shaking all the pillars of our health.⁵

It is essential to consider the vast ecosystem services that healthy environments contribute to our collective health and well-being. When compared to young forests and monoculture forests, old forests sequester large amounts of carbon dioxide, produce oxygen, create microclimates and irreplaceable habitats.⁶ Healthy forest canopies provide shading which help regulate air temperature and shade waterways. Intact ecosystems filter water more effectively, preventing overland flooding which contributes to water security and the prevention of infrastructure damage. Ecosystem protection also strengthens our resilience to wildfires, which in turn protects our air quality.⁷

As health professionals, we know that time spent in nature is tremendously beneficial to physical and mental health. We have recently expanded the scope of our practice to reflect the growing body of evidence in support of this essential pillar of health. The Parks Prescription Program, Canada's national, evidence-based nature prescription program is a way that we are now prescribing time in nature to supplement other therapies.⁸ We know that equitable access to public greenspace for all Nova Scotians is essential to our health.

Biodiversity underpins many natural systems on which we all depend for health and wellbeing. Protecting and restoring our ecosystems strengthens our resilience to climate change.⁹ Taking action to conserve old forests, particularly our most biodiverse and intact ecosystems will not only address the interconnected crises we face, but it will also provide important health co-benefits for our population.

Just as old trees create ideal soil conditions for the next generation to grow, we must take bold environmental action to protect and promote the health of all Nova Scotians, today, and for future generations.

⁵ https://www.who.int/health-topics/climate-change#tab=tab_1

⁶ Gilhen-Baker M, Roviello V, Beresford-Kroeger D, Roviello GN. Old growth forests and large old trees as critical organisms connecting ecosystems and human health. A review. *Environ Chem Lett.* 2022;20(2):1529-1538. doi: 10.1007/s10311-021-01372-y. Epub 2022 Jan 5. PMID: 35002589; PMCID: PMC8728480.

⁷ OECD (2023), *Taming Wildfires in the Context of Climate Change*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/dd00c367-en>.

⁸ <https://www.parkprescriptions.ca/>

⁹ <https://planetaryhealthalliance.org/biodiversity-shifts>



Sincerely,

Dr. Laurette Geldenhuys
On behalf of CAPE-NS

CC Honourable Michelle Thompson, Minister of Health and Wellness
Honourable Timothy Halman, Minister of Environment and Climate Change
Honourable Tory Rushton, Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables