# Internet consultations in support of national forest programmes

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*The coalition responsible for the development of Canada's National Forest Strategy for 2003 to 2008 used the Internet to reach out to a greater number of stakeholders, including remote communities and young people.*

Canada's first National Forest Strategy (NFS) was developed in 1981. At that time, the major concern was to ensure wood fibre access, and the development of the strategy involved a relatively small number of forestry specialists, mostly government officials. Since 1981, the NFS development process has followed the evolution of strategic thinking by including a variety of forest values in addition to wood production, such as spiritual values, environmental services and urban forestry.

Consistent with current trends, NFS development has increasingly relied on public participation and extensive consultation of all stakeholders, including the general public. Advantages of involving the general public in developing new strategies include:

- a wider source of information on which to base decisions;
- identification of emerging issues not already identified by policy research;
- input in monitoring existing policy and determining whether changes are needed.

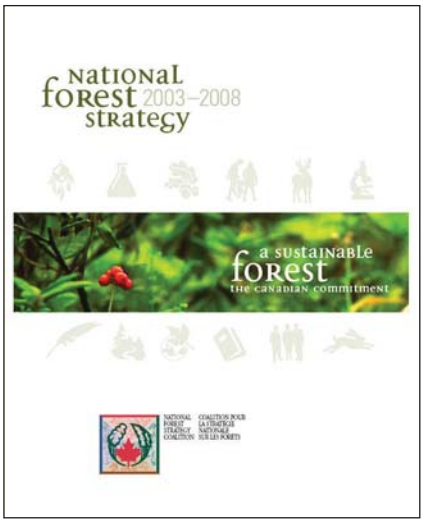
One of the novelties in the development of the National Forest Strategy 2003–2008 was the use of the Internet for consultation purposes. The basic idea was to improve forest policy by encouraging greater participation, learning and sharing of experience and expertise. Another intent was to help to create greater transparency of the democratic process in forest policy development.

To begin with, the draft vision document for the NFS, a schedule describing the development process and a corresponding list of important milestones were posted on the NFS Web site in addition to being distributed to the usual members of the forest community.

The vision document addressed the question of how Canadians wanted their forests to look within a 20- to 30-year horizon and how they wanted to use them. The National Forest Strategy Coalition committee responsible for this section of the strategy received numerous comments in support of the vision, many of them via the Internet.

Following the acceptance of the vision document by the NFS Steering Committee, a series of regional meetings to identify objectives for the strategy were held across the country. At the same time, the coalition conducted Internet consultations to reach Canadians who could not attend the regional meetings but wished to participate in the planning of the

***The final output of the consultations: Canada's National Forest Strategy 2003–2008***

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strategy. Stakeholders were notified about the strategy development and where to find the information and documentation on the Web through announcements in professional publications, journals and conferences as well as through mailings to the forest community.

The first draft of the NFS was presented at a national meeting and posted on the Internet at the same time. Thanks to the circulation of the draft strategy and its redrafting until a consensus position was reached, the current NFS includes a broader range of issues than did previous strategies.

Of the 145 consultation reports sent to the National Forest Strategy Coalition team drafting the strategy, more than 120 were communicated via the Internet. After the second version of the NFS was posted, the coalition received 45 consultation reports, all by Internet.

Since this was the first time that the NFS Coalition used the Internet as a means of reaching and communicating with the forest community, the NFS Steering Committee decided to carry out consultations using both the Internet and traditional mailings. Although no comparative cost assessment was carried out, posting documents on the Web clearly costs far less than traditional mailings.

**LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE USE OF INTERNET FOR CONSULTATION**

The consultation process in Canada demonstrated that the Internet makes it possible to reach more stakeholders than could normally be reached through meetings. This tool may be particularly useful in large countries where it is difficult and costly for people in remote locations to attend meetings. Although the NFS Coalition held five regional meetings and one national meeting, comments throughout the strategy development phase came via the Internet from individuals who had not attended any of the meetings.

Use of the Internet facilitates the identification and representation of regional perspectives that might otherwise be left out of the consultation process. In the best of situations, it would be ideal to hold regional meetings in each area of the country, but budget and time constraints often prevent this. With Internet, citizens do not have to be physically gathered at the same moment to get things accomplished.

Speed is also a great advantage. Use of the Internet can reduce the time required to consult stakeholders on a document. It can also allow a greater number of drafts to be circulated for consultation, thereby improving the quality of the final product. For many people, responding by e-mail is a more effective and less time-consuming way to participate in public consultations.

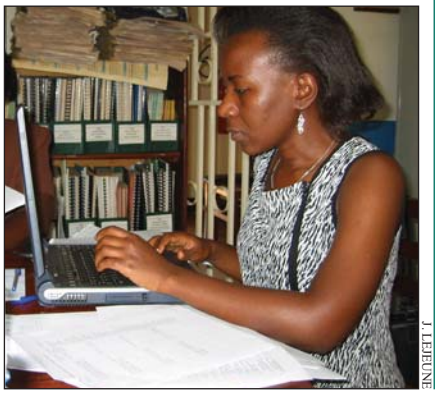
Using the Internet for public consultation facilitates participation in active policy development as it makes it possible for citizens to be involved in the successive steps of the process, and not just the information gathering phase. It also provides an opportunity to give feedback to stakeholders about their input.

However, it is fair to ask whether the responses received via the Internet were representative of all Canadian NFS stakeholders. It is possible that those who responded via the Internet were a more organized or sophisticated group (e.g. with a vested interest in the outcome) than those who attended meetings or those who failed to participate. Internet responses might be biased towards more computer-literate stakeholders. In regions with high Internet coverage and high computer literacy this may not be a problem, but in areas where Internet access is limited, such as remote rural areas for example, the use of Internet may present a more acute representation bias. Yet there are also biases associated with more traditional means of communication. It would be interesting to assess whether traditional mailings efficiently reach communities in remote areas; if not, other means of communication with remote communities may need to be developed. A Steering Committee can play an important part in deciding to allocate more weight to the voices or comments from a less vocal, organized or computer-literate community.

Those who conduct Internet consultations should follow certain precautions to ensure that they are conducted fairly and effectively. The United Kingdom, for example, has established a code of practice to ensure a common standard for public consultations across the government (Cabinet Office, 2004). It sets forth the following six principles to be followed in all consultations and to be reproduced in all consultation documents.

- Consult widely throughout the process, allowing a minimum of 12 weeks for written consultation at least once during the development of the policy.
- Be clear about what your proposals are, who may be affected, what questions are being asked and the time-scale for responses.
- Ensure that your consultation is clear, concise and widely accessible.
- Give feedback regarding the responses received and how the consultation process influenced the policy.

***Consulting documents via Internet and responding by e-mail can be a more effective and less time-consuming way to participate in public consultations***



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- Monitor your department's effectiveness at consultation, including through the use of a designated consultation coordinator.
- Ensure your consultation follows better regulation best practice, including carrying out a Regulatory Impact Assessment if appropriate.

Such standards could inspire any forest management institution wishing to use the Internet as a means to consult the public in the development of a national forest programme or strategy.

## OTHER INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN SUPPORT OF FOREST PROGRAMMES

Although the Internet is not yet available universally, it can no longer be considered a novelty. Rapid technological developments have brought other communication and information tools to the market, such as mobile-phone text messaging, podcasts (media files distributed by paid or unpaid subscription over the Internet for playback on mobile devices and personal computers) and blogs (on-line diaries on a subject), which could help reach out to even more people and which should be considered in the development or review of future forest programmes as means of disseminating information or organizing electronic discussions.

Mobile phones, currently numbered at 2 billion, are expected to reach 3 billion by 2008, with the greatest expansion expected in developing countries (ABI Research, 2006). Their capacity to send and receive text gives mobile phones the potential to become an increasingly important tool in public consultation, especially in areas where the Internet and landlines are not yet present. Internet access via mobile phones actually outpaces wireless access from notebook personal computers in many areas of the world. This is not to suggest that the complete draft text of a forest strategy would be read over a mobile phone, but messages regarding the consultation schedule or other announcements could be communicated with popular electronic means.

In addition to innovations in hardware, recent developments include software that enables visitors to certain Web sites to add, remove and edit content. The best-known example of community-managed content is Wikipedia, a free online multilingual encyclopaedia developed and maintained by volunteers at large who pool their knowledge to improve it. Anyone can be a member and contribute or modify content. Started in 2001, Wikipedia now has a database of approximately 8 Gigabytes. If such an effective cooperative effort is feasible at the global scale, it is possible to imagine the development of forest programmes through similar electronic participation models. Coordination by representative stakeholders would still be required to ensure that conflicting opinions are managed and that controversial issues are resolved.

## CONCLUSION

The growing recognition of civil society concerns and their inclusion in the agenda of international agreements and conventions brought about the first experiences in interactive policy development in the 1990s. Interactive policy approaches such as national forest programmes are increasingly recognized as a way of improving sectoral governance. New technologies such as Internet will facilitate the participation of wider audiences in the development of forest policies and programmes. As a result, public administrations have additional reason to abandon top-down approaches in policy development and will need to take on the coordination or facilitation of bottom-up approaches.

New electronic communication technologies also have another advantage. For young people today, these technologies are more than tools; they are part of the culture. In most Western countries, they are thought to have potential for offsetting the decline in voter participation, particularly among the younger generation. Using electronic communications in the development of forest programmes could be one way of enticing young people to participate and thus actively involving the future generations that will ultimately benefit from today's forest management decisions. ◆

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***Mobile phones, with their capacity to send and receive text, have potential to become an increasingly important tool in public consultation***

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