

A recovery plan that makes NB safer, healthier, and more resilient

Open letter to Premier Blaine Higgs

Premier Higgs
Office of the Premier
Chancery Place
P.O. Box 6000
Fredericton, NN
E3B 5H1

Dear Premier Higgs:

We join with the thousands of New Brunswickers who have relied so heavily on your efforts and those of other respected leaders like the indomitable Dr. Jennifer Russell and so many public service officials to thank you during these especially trying times.

Premier, as we move towards a safe and smart recovery plan, we want to provide our input on three key areas that not only will, using your words “re-start the economy,” but also rebuild so families and communities are secure, healthy and resilient.

1. Building food security

We agree with calls from farmer organizations, farmer market operators, local food security advocates, and others that the province needs to bolster food security. Now is the time to increase dramatically the proportion of our food from homegrown sources. We agree that we should supply more than the current eight per cent of our fruits and vegetables (outside of potatoes, maple syrup and blueberries.)¹ We need a balanced mix of New Brunswick-grown and sustainably-managed community gardens, home gardens, hobby farms, and larger agriculture operations supplying not just produce, but most of the food we eat if we want to improve food security.

Your own Local Food and Beverages Strategy has some good action items, but it lacks ambitious targets and funding.

¹ Local Food and Beverages Strategy, Buy/Achetez NB, Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, 2016, page 4.

To that end, we urge you to work with Minister Ross Wetmore and his federal counterparts in fisheries and in agriculture to increase funding that would:

- enable farmers to employ additional workers with increased wage subsidies, and grow the number of farm workers who live here in New Brunswick;
- maintain the strength of our local farmers' markets by ensuring they continue to operate in the imminent 2020 season and grow their product offerings and services beyond that of recent years;
- target programs to small- and medium-sized farmers, especially those involved in community-supported agriculture programs and provide the tools and program support for new entry-level farmers, especially young farmers;
- deploy land suitable for growing food with programming focused on making this land accessible to young people who want to start farming in 2020 and 2021;
- support community groups in every region of the province who can help their neighbours, of all ages, grow and harvest their own gardens; and
- develop assistance programs for our inshore fishing and fish-processing industry in NB coastal communities, and develop an objective for increasing New Brunswickers' consumption of local seafood.

As you know, the Conservation Council supports the main elements of New Brunswick's sustainable fisheries management plan, including support for industry to meet market demands for sustainability, food safety and food quality certifications as fishers increasingly share marine spaces with species at risk such as North Atlantic right whales; encouraging the development of innovative products, processes and green technologies for fisheries; providing support to industry to address chronic labour shortages; and engaging First Nations to promote business-to-business partnership opportunities and the mutual exchange of information to enhance best practices.²

And Premier, just like we need ambitious targets for food security, the same holds true for our fisheries to ensure New Brunswickers have access to local, sustainable catches and other local fisheries products. We have watched with interest, for example, that Quebec's 2018-2025 fisheries plan includes an objective of increasing consumption of local seafood by 20 per cent—a target, Premier, that we are certain you could pursue in our own sustainable fisheries management plan.

² <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/10/pdf/Publications/Fish-Peches/ActionPlan2018-2020.pdf>

At the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, we already promote Buy Local NB efforts and will do more. Our staff and many members and volunteers also grow food to varying degrees. We would love to share our stories with you about the pleasures of food self-sufficiency.

2. Build community and ecosystem resiliency by protecting nature and water

Premier, this is not the time to back away from NB's target to protect 10 per cent of its land base by 2020, nor to set aside its commitments to protect shorelines, both coastal and along our rivers and streams. In fact, the opposite is true. Now is the time to stretch beyond our own targets to contribute to national goals for 25 per cent protection of the land base and 25 per cent of the marine base.

We need to learn from our recent history, including two back-to-back 100-year floods of the St. John River, Hurricane Dorian and Arthur and the 2017 ice storm and move rapidly to implement protection plans that ensure natural systems can protect us from extreme weather. We should pursue federal infrastructure dollars to help us make our communities safer.

Similar to recovery actions proposed on other issues, nature protection needs strong, achievable policy targets. Moving NB from protecting a mere 4.8 per cent (the worst of Canadian provinces in early 2019) of its natural areas to 10 per cent by 2020, and developing a plan for 25 per cent protection by 2025 will address decades-long failures. It also positions New Brunswick as a willing partner in federal efforts to do the same.

Commitments that align with federal recovery investments ensure local jobs are created, especially in the building trades (for infrastructure projects), for temporary jobs like beach debris clean ups along our coastlines, and for skilled employment in protection and restoration.

To that end, Premier, we urge you to work with Minister Jeff Carr, Minister Mike Holland and their federal counterparts in natural resources, environment and infrastructure to:

- release a NB discussion paper on how to accelerate protected areas to meet and exceed provincial 2020 and 2025 targets and move closer to federal commitments. We understand, for example, that while delayed by a few months by this emergency, Newfoundland is poised to release its white paper, and other Atlantic provinces are ready to meet stronger targets than NB;
- request Minister Carr to prepare a coastal protection regulation under the *Clean Water Act* as committed to as early as 2008 and as recently as in the 2018 water strategy *and* work with other Cabinet members to develop an Oceans Conservation Corps project to employ people and enlist volunteers from our coastal communities and villages by expanding current beach projects like the Great Fundy Coastal Clean-up and various local programs along the Northumberland Strait;³

³ See for example <https://www.naturetrust.nb.ca/great-fundy-coastal-cleanup> and <http://visionh2o.com/en/projets/menage-ton-rivage>

- request that Minister Holland speed up reform under the *Lands and Forests Act* to ensure plans for forestry management companies increase and pay a fair price for forest products from private woodlot owners;
- similarly, request Minister Holland to better protect the Crown forest resource by decreasing the average size of clear cuts on Crown forest by about 80 per cent (as Nova Scotia is proposing), and replacing aerial herbicide spraying with more labour-intensive silviculture practices like manual thinning and Acadian forest restoration; and
- partner with the federal government to accelerate ‘green’ water and sewage infrastructure projects like shoreline restoration, wetland protection, flood zone protection and upgrading sewage systems.

3. Build an affordable, reliable and renewable electricity system

Premier, you may be surprised to learn that NB lags behind neighbouring Atlantic and New England jurisdictions in energy efficiency and renewable energy targets and policies. A recent report shows that leading utilities spend the equivalent of 1.5 per cent to 3 per cent of retail sales on energy efficiency, while New Brunswick spends less than half a per cent⁴.

A recent study by Dunsky and Associates for NB Power shows that we could easily triple our energy efficiency investments to almost 2 per cent of retail sales a year. That represents real power bill dollars that stay in the pockets of New Brunswickers. Many state and provincial jurisdictions and energy boards require utilities to pursue all cost-effective energy efficiency. We can make our economy more productive and lower household and business costs through investments in energy efficiency, but also renewable energy.

Our emissions-free goal of 40 per cent of electricity supply is mostly a hydro target: Just 7.5 per cent of our electricity comes from wind. New England jurisdictions have similar goals but do not include large hydro or nuclear. With costs falling dramatically for renewable and storage technologies, New Brunswick has an opportunity to advance coal phase-out at Belledune (with important provisions for workers’ just transition⁵), while also minimizing use of oil and natural gas. Remember, over the next 10 to 30 years the world is moving to zero emissions of greenhouse gases. We can significantly increase the supply of electricity from solar and wind, using existing and new baseload and storage technologies to replace fossil fuel power plants. Wind and solar can go up in weeks, months, or at the most a couple of years, compared to small modular nuclear which will take up to 15 years and cost more.

⁴ <https://www.scorecard.encycanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/New-Brunswick-Mixed-Messages.pdf>

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<https://www.conservationcouncil.ca/en/government-of-canada-welcomes-report-from-just-transition-task-force-for-canadian-coal-power-workers-and-communities/>

Strong best-in-class targets and barrier-reducing policies can drive post-pandemic recovery investments and support NB Power in securing approval for efficiency and renewable investments by the Energy Utility Board. Recent studies have shown that investment in energy efficiency projects can create thousands of trades jobs and benefit residents by reducing their electricity bills.

Employment gains from energy efficiency are distributed across the economy; about half of the new jobs are in the construction, trade, and manufacturing sectors. Energy efficiency is an effective stimulus because it creates local jobs across sectors – and it is always “shovel worthy.”

Premier, we have the talent and a strong entrepreneurial tradition, combined with a highly skilled unionized workforce, to rebuild our energy system so it is more reliable, less expensive to ratepayers, and 100 per cent renewable.

To that end, we recommend the following actions:

- instruct the Minister of Energy and Resource Development to work with NB Power, provincial stakeholders, and the Government of Canada to develop an electricity action plan for New Brunswick. The plan would include targets and timelines, such as retrofitting 100 per cent of NB building stock starting immediately and continuing over the next six years. A recent study by Efficiency Canada found that aggressively investing in energy efficiency in New Brunswick could result in a net increase of 3,460 jobs per year. The same study found a net increase of \$730 million in GDP per year for the province. (Not to mention \$2 billion (net) in increased provincial tax collections over the study period);⁶
- increase renewable energy targets to 40 per cent of supply by 2030, including investment in battery and other storage technologies (pumped storage via hydro or air). NB Power received more project proposals than it could support in its request for proposals under the 80MW renewable energy call. Let’s review shovel-worthy project opportunities, and/or issue another call now and get new projects started;
- set energy-efficiency targets of at least two per cent of retail sales per year, with the goal of reaching 3 per cent in ten years. These targets guarantee jobs created in the recovery period continue in the long term;
- partner with the federal government to triple the number of low-income home retrofits. Provincial support to this program could double immediately to ensure low-income households benefit from lower energy costs while dealing with pandemic economic concerns. The Energy Utilities Board denied the expansion of this program in 2018 (which is why we need to reform the electricity act and the Energy Utilities Board act); and

⁶ [Efficiency Canada report Less is More May 2018](#)

- partner with the federal government to upgrade New Brunswick electricity transmission infrastructure as part of the effort to create an Atlantic renewable energy hub and transmission corridor.

These are truly unprecedented times and we thank you again, Premier, for the strong leadership you, Dr. Russell and the entire pandemic response team has provided New Brunswickers. As we work from home, we join with you in applauding the extraordinary efforts of our nurses, doctors, teachers, health workers, senior care providers, first responders, firefighters, front line workers, and public servants and community leaders of all kinds for working tirelessly to keep our citizens and communities safe and healthy.

Sincerely,



Lois Corbett
Executive Director



Louise Comeau
Director of Climate Change and Energy Solutions



Matt Abbott
Director of Marine Conservation

cc: Hon. Jeff Carr, Minister Environment and Local Government
Hon. Mike Holland, Minister Energy and Resource Development
Hon. Bill Oliver, Minister Transportation and Infrastructure
Hon. Ross Wetmore, Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries