

Pollution, Politics and Pulp

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The Boat Harbour tidal estuary

PHOTO: Government of Nova Scotia

TAKE ACTION

Read more about the history of environmental racism and activism from The Pulp Mill in Joan Baxter's "The Mill: Fifty Years of Pulp and Protest."

A'Se'K/Boat Harbour, N.S. has suffered being the site for an Effluent Treatment Facility for over 50 years. Joan Baxter recounts the long saga of protests, broken promises and pollution in *The Mill: Fifty years of Pulp and Protest*¹.

In an interview for this article, Baxter said people kept fighting against the mill because the situation didn't improve.

"The pulp mill was a really extreme, egregious clear case of exploitation," said Baxter, and it did a "great deal of harm" to both local forestry and politics in Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia. "That pulp mill, as I always wrote, didn't just pollute the waters and the air in Nova Scotia. It also polluted our government," said Baxter.

Baxter pointed to the effects of centralizing the forestry industry, namely, more clear cutting, softwood growth and use of herbicides. As for Nova Scotia politics, there are many instances of the government making concessions for the mill to keep it in operation since it opened in 1967.

This political history with the mill is, in part, why its closure in 2020 was so remarkable.

The Boat Harbour Act states that the mill had to stop using the Boat Harbour Effluent Treatment Facility as of Jan. 31, 2020². When the mill failed to create alternatives for treating effluent in time, it was forced to close.

The fact that the government followed through with this act instead of extending the deadline is attributable to a few factors, according to Baxter.

- 1 The patient and persistent work of Pictou Landing First Nation, specifically, Chief Andrea Paul
- 2 People keeping track of the facts to hold the mill accountable
- 3 People coming together from all backgrounds with a common message

"It took the citizens exposing that in the media to make a change. And I think that's what built to that [follow-through], that and the

pipeline break in 2014 when Pictou Landing First Nation said no, enough is enough," said Baxter.

The work Pictou Landing First Nation did to get then-premier Stephen McNeil to agree to the Boat Harbour Act was aided by the effort of previous generations and media attention.

Despite seeing the power of citizen engagement and activism play out in this story, Baxter said, "I'm not quite sure it would still happen today." She cited the number of concerning projects on the horizon in the province, alongside a concern for corporate capture in our governments. Corporate capture means that regulatory agencies start acting more like cheerleaders and enablers instead of regulators.

Where does A'Se'K/Boat Harbour stand now? While the closure of the treatment facility in A'Se'K/Boat Harbour is a long-fought-for success by the community, clean-up has still not begun six years later.

At the time of writing, the latest updates on the project report a delay due to disagreement between BuildNS (the project lead appointed by the province) and Pictou Landing First Nation. In January 2025, BuildNS received approval from the federal environment minister for their plan to expand the existing containment cell on the site. In February 2025, Pictou Landing First Nation applied for judicial review of the decision because they do not want the sludge to be kept in their community³.

BuildNS and Pictou Landing First Nation have not responded to requests for comment.

One sad aspect of this continued saga is that taxpayers are on the hook for the cost of cleanup, currently estimated at \$425 million⁴.

Baxter said that these long-term costs are not likely taken into account when new industrial projects are proposed. To ensure a long-term benefit, "you want to evaluate the projects, who owns them, who's going to make the most money off them and what the environmental and social costs will be in Nova Scotia," said Baxter.

REFERENCES

1. Joan Baxter, *The Mill: Fifty Years of Pulp and Protest* (Pottersfield Press, 2017).
2. Government of Nova Scotia. 2015. Boat Harbour Act. Statutes of Nova Scotia, 2015, c. 4.
3. Boat Harbour Remediation Project, 2020. <https://boatharbourproject.buildns.ca>.
4. Michael Gorman, "Federal minister signs off on province's Boat Harbour cleanup plan", CBC, January 28, 2025.

Amy Ward (she/her) is studying journalism and enjoys reporting on local politics. She also enjoys music, crafts and the outdoors.