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Open Letter signed by 8 leading scientists from across Canada who lead forestry research networks

A diversified economy, a transforming forest products sector

The recent drop in oil prices has highlighted the vulnerability of the Canadian economy. Canada must build a diversified manufacturing base that is less impacted by the slowdown of a single dominant sector. At the same time, today we are at a critical juncture where we must strengthen our traditional manufacturing base by promoting innovation in our sustainably-managed forest resource, and provide jobs in the regions of Canada.

It is in this spirit that the 3rd FIBRE conference will be held over 10-13 May at École Polytechnique in Montreal. FIBRE brings together 8 large university networks comprised of more than 700 professors and researchers, and links with innovation partners such as Canada's forest sector companies, the Forest Products Association of Canada (FPAC), FPInnovations, Natural Resources Canada, and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC).The goal of the FIBRE research networks is to help transform Canada's forest industry by developing innovative new processes and products in the emerging bio-economy.

The FIBRE networks and their partners already have several notable achievements to their credit.

In the wood products sector, for example, research by FIBRE networks has led to new construction technologies and a better understanding of performance of wood products in mid-rise and high-rise buildings, which may lead to the construction of wood sky-scrapers in Canada.

In pulp and paper, the potential of the so-called biorefinery is emerging. The success of CelluForce is a great example. Located in Windsor, Quebec, CelluForce is the first demonstration plant in the world to produce nanocrystalline cellulose (NCC), a compound that can be used to repair bones and teeth, and can be incorporated into futuristic polymers. In

another recent example, Cascades has recently announced a Canadian first. Their investment in the Norampac-Cabano mill will allow extraction of wood chip hemicellulose to produce cellulosic sugars – suitable for various applications, for example in biofuels and the agri-business. These two projects are just a taste of the emerging forest bio-economy.

With these innovations and others, Canada is at the forefront of the development of high value-added products from the forest. As these innovations are implemented, there will be an increasing imperative for partnership between forest product companies and other manufacturing sectors, to broaden the scope of product development activities.

This approach is perfectly compatible with ideals of sustainable development. Most Canadians are not aware that our forest products industry has an unparalleled reputation. An international survey conducted by Leger Marketing in 2014 indicated that the Canadian forest products industry is considered the most environmentally responsible in the world.

The forest industry may be fragile at the moment, but it remains one of Canada's major manufacturing sectors with sales of $58 billion, employing 230,000 Canadians, and contributing $19 billion to Canada's trade surplus. This is a great starting point. Our industry must build on our world-leading innovation to shift towards high-value innovative products, and ensure a prosperous future in an increasingly competitive market.

It is critical, especially in these economically-challenging times that FIBRE continues to fulfill its role in the successful partnership between Canada's universities, the forest industry, FPInnovations and government. This partnership is the key to the future of the Canadian forest sector; strategically important for the Canadian economy, and the prosperity of hundreds of communities in the regions of Canada.

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