



Agenda-setting and framing of policy solutions for forest pests in Canada and Sweden: Avoiding beetle outbreaks?



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ABSTRACT

Extreme events such as pest outbreaks is one of the issues that may become more pronounced with climate change, placing potentially unprecedented requirements on policy systems to manage and develop responses to these, including potential changes in legislation. This study reviews the way in agenda-setting and framing of policy solutions was developed for the issue of bark beetle pest outbreaks following major outbreaks in Sweden and Canada. The study concludes that the larger events in Canada have resulted in a longer policy window, with a higher focus on developing responses on multiple levels, while the issue in Sweden has led to more specialized response, with the policy window closing after instrumental revisions of legislation. While such responses may be appropriate at the present, they place into consideration development of responses to potentially larger events in the context of climate change.

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1. Introduction and aim

Northern Europe and North America both contain extensive coniferous forest that are commercially important for the forest industry sectors. The extent of these forests and their homogeneity, as well as climate change, make them particularly prone to forest health problems. In the last few years there have been severe outbreaks of the North American mountain pine beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*) which have devastated large areas of lodgepole and other pine forest in western Canada and the United States. In northern Europe, where Sweden maintains large areas of coniferous forest that supply some 10% of the country's export value, the severe storms of 2005 and 2007 led to outbreaks of the spruce bark beetle (*Ips typographus*) as a result of wind fallen trees and considerable amount of dead wood in the forest. Although mountain pine beetle and spruce beetle's ecological dynamics differ (Kärvemo and Schroeder, 2010), both species are projected to increase as a result of warmer winters and drought, as well as increased risk of windfall due to extreme weather events; all of which will stress trees and increase forest susceptibility to infestation. Given the economic importance of these coniferous forests and their increased vulnerability, numerous policies for planned adaptation and prevention in both northern Europe and North America have emerged over the past 15 years (cf. Freer-Smith, 2007).

This paper comparatively analyses policy development concerning beetle outbreaks and response approaches as it has occurred in Sweden and Canada: two countries chosen in order to compare North American and northern European awareness of, and responses to, the issue. The study utilises the theoretical framework of agenda-setting and policy formulation which reviews how issues can get on the political agenda, and asks:

- How did beetle outbreak issues come to be placed on the agenda among policy makers (at national and smaller scales)?
- To what extent has agenda setting led to policy implementation, and in particular legislative changes or commitment to follow-up that may improve bark beetle management?

It may thus be discussed to what extent the events have resulted in policy formation or legislation, as well as whether incremental changes that may result from smaller events provide sufficient readiness for potentially larger events in a system. The paper thereby adds a specific policy development-focused study to existing work on the social dimensions of forest disturbance by insects (see e.g. Flint, 2007, Flint et al., 2009, Parkins and MacKendrick, 2007, Patriquin et al., 2007, McFarlane and Watson, 2008; Müller, 2011 and Wermelinger, 2004). It also covers Sweden, which in comparison with North America, has been discussed very little in literature (see e.g. Petersen and Stuart, 2014, Flint et al., 2009, Bogle and Cornelis van Kooten, 2012).

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2. Theoretical framework

The overall conditions for forest management on the ground are inevitably constrained and directed by regulation and policy that determine the range of potential management measures available, for example in order to respond to pest outbreaks (cf. Foster et al., 2010). In the policy research area, agenda-setting refers to a process through which “a ‘condition’ (e.g. an event, a situation) is perceived, identified, and framed as a ‘problem’ by policy-makers, and consequently placed on the domestic agenda. In other words, throughout a selection process, what once was a condition later becomes part of the ‘official list’ of matters that a government seeks to solve” (López-Santana, 2006: 486–487). This means that a problem has to be identified as being of high level of concern to result in, for example, additional funding or policy development linked to it. Competition thus continuously exist between the multiple potential problems to be taken up in policy, where any new issue thus needs to compete with multiple established ones such as education, health care and jobs for gaining emphasis and subsequently, for instance, funding. Thus, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient ... in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993: 52, quoted in Weaver, 2007: 143, italics in original; see also Reese, 2007, Zhou and Moy, 2007).

Policy formulation, taking place following successful agenda-setting, involves developing acceptable courses of action for dealing with the problem, potentially choosing among competing problem formulations or framings (López-Santana, 2006, Fifer and Orr, 2013). Agenda setting and framing effects are thus often seen as related (Weaver 2007, Zhou and Moy, 2007, Chyi and McCombs, 2004). Entman (2007: 164, italics in original) notes that “[a]genda setting can ... be seen as another name for successfully performing the first function of framing: defining problems worthy of public and government attention”, or, in other words, getting them onto the governmental agenda, defined as “the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time” (Kingdon, 1995: 3).

Agenda-setting thus involves a process by which policy items are transferred to an active agenda, often through the leaders of the issues (known as policy entrepreneurs) mobilising resources favouring their issue. While problems are mainly assumed to exist over time, the formulation of conditions, including political effort and clout as well as the advent of specific context changes, may thus result in the re-framing of a condition into a problem. An important role is thus played by what Kingdon calls “policy entrepreneurs”, encompassing a wide variety of actors such as interest groups, policy makers or other leaders, who are defined as policy entrepreneurs by that they are able to gain a position of credible advocacy in order to influence processes (Kingdon, 1995). These are often, however, limited to more professional communities that are able to access policy-making, but may in the case of a more well established or larger problem come to include also for instance local communities or community leaders. The ways in which these types of actors are able to move change forward is through: 1) utilising the event of a *problem* (a crisis, changes in accepted indicators, or the personal experience of prominent policy makers) in order to transfer a problem from a condition to an agenda item; 2) drawing upon the body of established *policy* and change in this as a result of new reports or technologies to highlight a certain problem; and 3) utilising changes due to *political* elections, administration change or public mood to promote the specific problem item (Kingdon, 1995). If all these streams – problem recognition e.g. through an event, policy feasibility and political favour – are coupled, Kingdon views this as supporting the opening of a policy window whereby the problem and solutions advocated may be taken up in policy.

The success of agenda setting may thus be measured in policy establishment, and is crucially dependent on competition with other agenda

items as well as the existence of favourable personnel and the perceived urgency of any key event. Some authors have emphasised the role of media in promoting such a perceived urgency (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; cf. Eustis, 2000). In all these cases, events have also been highlighted as a crucial agenda-setting tool in literature on environmental policy establishment (cf. Birkland, 1998; Farley et al., 2008), which also means that the reporting of such events in media may be a mediating factor as ‘dramatic events are the most likely means by which to link actual environment indicators and their salience for the media, the public, and policymakers’ (Soroka, 2002). Events regularly act as triggers for recognizing the problem as they are, in Birkland’s definition, sudden and apparent to policy makers and elites simultaneously, affect a community or community of interest, and result in or suggest harm (Birkland, 2009: 147). Here, a few large events gain the most attention, and the way in which these are framed are regularly fought over by different interest groups as several different understandings of what the crucial issues to be dealt with are normally plausible in larger, more complex events such as such as a storm or other disaster (Birkland, 2009). In this study, the focus is placed on the way such focusing events – in this case including bark beetle outbreaks – may impact policy-making.

Finally, then, once a problem has been established on the agenda, credible solutions to it must also be developed and institutionalised in order for the problem to be dealt with. These solutions are developed in relation to the different framings of the issue, as they “involve developing pertinent and acceptable proposed courses of action for dealing with public problems ... [among potentially] several competing proposals” (Anderson 2000: 113, quoted in López-Santana, 2006: 490). In this process, as well as earlier, the specific way in which the problem and solutions are framed or expressed linking specific problems and solutions, is crucial. Framing contests may, for example, develop between different actors and may, in cases where no one clear solution is proposed by multiple parties, result in more limited solutions than would otherwise have been the case (Fifer and Orr, 2013, Ballart and Riba, 2002, Birkland, 2009). As events fade from urgency and the policy window closes, a large number of contextual factors including the existence of different expert and other groups of policy entrepreneurs may thus influence the types of choices and different solutions developed (Henstra, 2010). Binding legislation may here be regarded as the strongest means of policy formulation but may not always be achievable, for example as solutions identified may be too costly, or as the policy window is more constrained due to the limited relative urgency of the issue in competition with other issues (cf. Olsson, 2009). Important concerns thus include whether an issue is able to get to the level of binding legislation or programme support or, indeed, have any such proposals made concerning it.

3. Methodology

For this case study, the countries of Sweden and Canada were chosen in order to compare North American and northern European awareness of, and responses to, the issue of bark beetle outbreaks. As much of the literature on agenda-setting identifies the considerable importance of events for getting legislation determined and/or implemented (e.g. Birkland, 2009), it may thus be discussed to what extent varying events in the different contexts have resulted in policy formation or legislation. In order to provide this comparison, in Canada the province of British Columbia, which was affected by the Canadian beetle outbreak early on, was chosen as the specific case in order to identify an area of corresponding size to Sweden and an example of challenges with regard to early response.

The study relies on policy and legislative document reviews and on semi-structured interviews. A process-tracing method was applied whereby policy development was traced through legislation i.e. by studying the legislative process, including preparatory works (Bills etc.), policy documents and the semi-structured interviews (often identified through snowball selection) to identify any events, policy or political changes or entrepreneurs that had served to move the concern into

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