

Shawville, October 5, 2006

The Honourable Gary Lunn, PC, MP
Minister of Natural Resources
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Lunn:

The recent decision by Natural Resources Canada to stop producing paper topographic maps and to close the Canada Map Office as of January 2007 will have a significant impact on those who rely on such maps for their safety, work and recreation.

I am the author of “The Map Room: A Weblog About Maps,”¹ a web site about cartography, maps and mapping technologies with a daily readership of several thousand. My site covers maps in all their forms: from centuries-old maps housed in national libraries to the latest GPS-enhanced navigation systems. I’ve been writing this site for three and a half years; I have, you might say, a general grounding in the subject. I’ve also been following this story since the decision was first announced in late 2005, and have reported on it several times.

Your department’s decision to provide digital data rather than paper maps is, in my opinion, not in Canadians’ best interest.

Despite advances in computer-based maps and handheld navigation systems, maps on paper still serve a vital role. GPS and digital mapping data are not yet at a point where they can be a total replacement for paper; no amount of technology will be of use, for example, where there is no electricity, and for many users the technology required to access digital mapping data — particularly in its raw form — is a daunting barrier.

In addition, it has been argued that the recent increase in map-related technology — from web sites like Google Maps to in-car GPS — will actually increase the demand for paper maps,² in the sense that a rising tide lifts all boats (or perhaps in the sense that, as many of us have discovered, a “paperless” office generates more paper).

Paper maps will still be needed and used, regardless of whether the Map Office produces them. But if Natural Resources Canada leaves the production of topo maps to private-sector publishers who will use the digital mapping data, it will substantially

¹ <http://www.mcwetboy.net/maproom/>

² Chris Fisk, vice-president of JIMAPCO: “We’re seeing increases in all sales in all our product groups. . . . People are still buying paper maps and atlases, and probably more than ever before.” *The Business Review (Albany)*, April 7, 2006.

reduce the quality of maps available to the Canadian public. To be sure, the marketplace will ensure that good-quality topographic maps of national and provincial parks will remain available, for the most part. But topo maps of the rest of the country will be produced by large-format ink-jet plotters. I've seen such maps: I volunteer for the local archives, and we have a collection of county-level cadastral maps produced by such plotters. They're quite inferior in cartographic quality and in durability to the topographic maps. They will also be far more costly: from what I understand, maps produced in this manner will be anywhere from three to four times as expensive.

The result will be maps that are less useful, less durable, less available, more expensive, and less accessible. Some areas may not have paper topo maps at all unless they're printed on demand, at exorbitant rates. Rural areas off the beaten track (such as mine) will suffer the most. Already at a disadvantage, rural areas and remote areas, with too much geography to map and too few people to pay for it, will feel a disproportionate impact in terms of tourism, resource exploration and the environment.

The savings booked by Natural Resources Canada — essentially, from closing a warehouse in Ottawa — are insignificant in comparison with the impact this loss of service will have. This is a disruptive change, not an evolutionary one. There may be a day when paper maps are obsolete, but that day has not yet come.

This decision comes too soon, and affects too many people.

My readers are very interested in this issue, so I will post any reply to my web site.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Crowe

cc. The Hon. Lawrence Cannon, PC, MP (Pontiac)
Catherine Bell, MP (Vancouver Island North)
The Hon. Roy Cullen, PC, MP (Etobicoke North)
Claude DeBellefeuille, députée (Beauharnois—Salaberry)