

## **Domtar's media-shy Indonesian owner plots more growth in Canada, says he's willing to appear before Parliament**

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The foreign industrialist who controls Canada's biggest pulp-and-paper company says he's a "big believer" in this country and would welcome the opportunity to appear before Parliament to ease any concerns about his ownership.

Jackson Widjaja, an Indonesian whose family is one of Asia's wealthiest, says he launched Paper Excellence Group in Canada in 2006 because the country's politics and regulatory environment are stable while its resources are "very rich." And he says he intends to continue to invest here, parlaying the assets he's amassed into something even bigger as he aims to become the continent's top pulp-and-paper producer.

"Canada is really my first pocket of gold," Mr. Widjaja told The Globe and Mail in an exchange earlier this year, the first interview he says he has ever given to a media outlet. "I'm very thankful to Canada and the people and the government for helping me make it possible. So I definitely will not do any harm to Canada. Rather ... I will continue to contribute to Canada."

Mr. Widjaja has come under repeated scrutiny after consolidating a big piece of Canada's forest-products sector in short order. Paper Excellence bought British Columbia's Catalyst Paper Corp. in 2019, then Montreal-based Domtar Corp. in 2021 and finally Resolute Forest Products Inc. in 2023.

The entrepreneur has never taken part in any public engagements in Canada despite calls for him to introduce himself and outline his strategic vision, limiting his interactions to private meetings with key business leaders and some government officials. His willingness to speak to The Globe suggests he understands there's a downside to being so withdrawn.

Much is at stake. The quick growth of his business empire has generated significant concern, centring on Paper Excellence's documented ties to the Widjaja family's other holdings – specifically Sinar Mas and its subsidiary Asia Pulp and Paper Group (APP), the latter of which is controlled by Mr. Widjaja's father.

APP has faced intense criticism for its forestry practices and human-rights abuses in Indonesia, particularly from environmentalists who say it caused widespread devastation to rain forests. The company lost its accreditation several years ago with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an international non-profit that certifies forest-management practices.

The worry is that Mr. Widjaja will do in Canada what APP did overseas. In approving the Paper Excellence takeovers, the government has left a significant portion of Canada's natural resources and mill towns exposed to "a feudal relationship with a family that has a very dubious track record," former New Democratic Party MP Charlie Angus has said.

Questions about Mr. Widjaja, 45, have only intensified in recent months after Paper Excellence officials confirmed that he will inherit sole control of APP as part of an estate-planning move by his father. The FSC is now reviewing the implications of the two companies being owned by one individual.

The ownership transfer means that Mr. Widjaja will have control over two of the world's biggest pulp-and-paper companies operating on a total of four continents. Richmond, B.C.-based Paper Excellence, which now operates as Domtar, is active in North America, Europe and South America, while Jakarta, Indonesia-based APP does business primarily in Asia.

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Certification by the FSC is important in part because many retailers say they only use FSC-certified or recycled wood. After a Greenpeace campaign in the early 2010s, multiple customers ditched APP as a supplier, including Kraft Foods Group Inc., Unilever PLC and Staples Inc.

Mr. Widjaja offered little clarity on his impending ownership of APP but said he did not think it would complicate things, calling it a "fun" challenge that won't change how he operates Domtar. He said he's confident that his team is doing everything it can to retain its FSC certification. Sustainability, he insisted, is "at the core of our business."

Parliament's natural-resources committee voted unanimously in December to call Mr. Widjaja to testify before it but the request was aborted when the House prorogued and an election was called. It was the second time such an invitation had been extended. The first time, in 2023, the entrepreneur sent executives in his place.

"I kind of would like to stay out of the limelight," Mr. Widjaja said, adding that his team was nevertheless making plans for him to appear before the committee before the election call and that he's not deliberately avoiding Canada. "I would have been happy to set the record straight," he said.

Mr. Widjaja said he's grateful to Canadian stakeholders for allowing him to build his forest-products manufacturer, adding that he believes the industry holds significant future potential despite the challenges. He said the company reinvests US\$1.3-billion into its mill operations each year, including capital expenditures and maintenance.

The pulp-and-paper magnate, a soft-spoken family man who loves to read and fish, characterizes himself as a third-generation entrepreneur and an "active investor" whose lifelong idol is celebrity billionaire Warren Buffett. "He will leave the day-to-day management to his local management team. So that's more like my style too," Mr. Widjaja said. At Domtar, manufacturing veteran John Williams oversees the company as non-executive chairman.

Mr. Widjaja said he is a frequent traveller and has homes in Asia, Europe and North America, including Vancouver. He has three children – two teenagers who are currently studying in the United States, as well as a six-year-old. The executive was schooled in Indonesia and Singapore and holds a master's degree in industrial engineering from the University of Michigan.

When the dot-com crash hit around 2001, Mr. Widjaja returned to Asia for some hands-on experience in the family business – a conglomerate that at the time had assets in banking, property development and palm-oil production. He sniffed around to see what interested him most, settling on pulp and paper, and then zeroed in on Canada. In 2006, he struck out on his own and bought a pulp mill in Meadow Lake, Sask., shortly afterward.

Nearly two decades and three major takeovers later, Domtar's annual revenue now tops US\$10-billion, according to Mr. Widjaja's LinkedIn profile (which uses an alternative spelling of his last name). But he says he's not done. "I hope that we can be No. 1 in the North America region."

Domtar is the largest pulp-and-paper company in Canada as measured by output capacity and ranks third in North America for total market pulp-and-paper production, according to data from Fastmarkets RISI. The owner said he's eyeing more merger and acquisition opportunities and weighing a major mill conversion project in Gatineau, which could create a significant number of new jobs.

Unease persists about how his influence on the industry will play out, however. “Our forests are in crisis,” said Charles Latimer, head of nature and biodiversity at Greenpeace Canada. “We can’t hand them over to a private company, especially one that takes public resources but offers no accountability for past environmental failures.”

Mr. Williams countered that Domtar’s ability to retain its customers postacquisitions shows they’re reassured that it is acting ethically and sustainably. “We don’t want to behave badly,” he said. “Nobody needs healthy, well-managed forests more than we do.”

The company is set to unveil a new sustainability strategy on Tuesday in Montreal.

“I’m a big believer in Canada,” Mr. Widjaja said. “Going forward, I still have faith that the Canadian people and the Canadian government will allow me to continue my investments in Canada. ... I can envision further growth.”

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