

Forests require flexible management

It's unfair to blame provincial legislation for environmental problems

BY SHARON GLOVER, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 26, 2011 7:28 AM

For more than a century, British Columbia's forests have been the cornerstone of the province's economy. At 60 million hectares, equivalent to 148,000 Stanley Parks, the province's publicly-owned forests are a vast and valuable asset, sustaining rural and first nations communities, providing recreational opportunities and generating wealth to finance a broad range of public services. Clearly, healthy forests are an integral part of the province's economic well being and quality of life.

We need to take the sustainability of our forests seriously. And we do. B.C. is recognized as a world leader in sustainable forest management. But some critics claim there's been a marked erosion of forest stewardship and sustainable forest management since the province adopted the Forest and Range Practices Act.

B.C.'s forest professionals are included in the critique, as there is some concern that the Act's increased reliance on foresters is no substitute for increased government regulation of the forests.

The critics chronicle what they see as the decline of B.C.'s forests from 2004, when the province replaced the highly restrictive Forest Practice Code with the Forest and Range Practices Act.

Forest ecosystems evolve, change and adapt over hundreds of years. The five years B.C.'s Forest and Range Practices Act has been in place is hardly a blink of an eye in the life of a forest, which makes it patently unfair to blame this piece of legislation for environmental issues.

The act was one of the first in North America requiring tenure holders to pursue sustainable forest management planning and to provide measurable results. It was also one of the first to require tenure holders to specifically address biodiversity.

One of the most fundamental changes under the Forest and Range Practices Act was the shift away from the stringent prescriptive regulations of the Forest Practices Code to a more flexible results-based framework that can be adapted to individual situations and ecosystems.

Under this new policy, government establishes forest management objectives and forest tenure holders are held accountable. Forest tenure holders must prepare forest stewardship plans that show how operations will be consistent with objectives set by government for soils, timber, wildlife, water, fish, biodiversity and cultural heritage resources. Much of the choice regarding how to achieve required results and how to conduct actual onground practices and processes is up to the tenure holder operating under a "professional reliance" management model.

This approach requires an increasing level of reliance on the decisions, advice and expertise of forest professionals who are held accountable for operating within the law, adhering to strict ethical standards and codes of conduct, and practicing professional forestry in the public interest. Under the new





British Columbia's Forest and Range Practices Act was one of the first in North America requiring tenure holders to pursue sustainable forest management.
Photograph by: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun Files, Vancouver Sun

regulations, foresters now have the latitude to make the necessary decisions applicable to each unique ecosystem that will contribute to the short and long-term health and sustainability of our forests.

While this forest management model has its detractors, it is far more adaptable to individual on-the-ground situations requiring a specific forest management prescription than the cookie-cutter approach of the Forest Practices Code and is well suited to meet the environmental challenges of the future.

Critics mourning the loss of the Forest Practices Code are missing some key facts that tell a different story about the state of our forests.

For one thing, our forest companies are remarkably compliant with stringent international standards. B.C. has more sustainable forest management (SFM)-certified area than any nation in the world. These are internationally recognized and endorsed standards developed by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA), Forest Stewardship Council, Sustainable Forestry Initiative and International Organization for Standardization 1400. By mid-2010, an estimated 54 million hectares in B.C. were certified under an SFM standard, an area equivalent to 68 per cent of the public and private land base. To put that in perspective, only 10 per cent of the world's forests are SFM-certified.

B.C. has experienced three major forest fire seasons since 2004. On top of this, the mountain pine beetle has infested 17.5 million hectares of forest lands, an area five times the size of Vancouver Island. Forest professionals have ensured that reforestation is keeping pace with timber harvesting as an obligation of sustainable forest management. In 2007, about 185,00 hectares were planted, with 235 million seedlings of 15 different tree species. However, additional investment in forest inventory is required to determine the appropriate silviculture prescriptions needed to maintain forest health.

A significant challenge facing B.C. forests and forest professionals today is climate change. Rising to this unprecedented challenge requires a more flexible, cooperative approach to forest management

among government, tenure holders and forest professionals, which translates into better land use decisions.

In northeastern B.C., for example, western larch can now be planted to increase species diversity and address potential forest health and productivity impacts associated with climate change. Western larch is a high yielding tree species, less susceptible to pest infestation than indigenous lodge pole pine, which is particularly sensitive to temperature changes. Even a one degree Celsius change in temperature can have a significant impact on pine regeneration rates and yield. The chief forester's decision to expand seed use of western larch beyond its contemporary range has created a new standard for foresters that will help maintain the health and diversity of our northern forests. The Association of BC Forest Professionals serves as a valuable conduit for transferring this knowledge to the forest professional.

B.C.'s foresters play an integral role in managing and protecting our forest lands for future generations. The old world view of taking a one-size-fits-all approach to forest management had to be replaced with more adaptable practices that respond to changing social, economic and ecological conditions. The continued health of our forests and the vitality of our province depend on it.

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