

ABC FP Responds to the Forest Practices Board Bulletin Professional Reliance in BC Forests

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The Forest Practices Board (FPB) published a Board Bulletin on June 11, 2013 “Professional Reliance in BC Forests: Is it really the issue?” This article is the Association of BC Forest Professionals’ (ABC FP’s) contribution to the conversation initiated by the FPB.

The ABC FP is very pleased that the FPB has started this important conversation on professional reliance. And, like the FPB, we continue to hear comments that suggest there is confusion regarding the application of professional reliance. We can add to the conversation by discussing where we think the problem arises.

The problem is there are incompatible expectations from professions, employers and stakeholders regarding what outcomes professional reliance can deliver. We can provide four reasons for this.

First, while we do have land-use plans in many areas of the province they do not provide clear objectives or public preferences at the regional or, when required, local levels. As a result, the tenure holders must decide and their choices might not reflect public or government preferences. The tenure holder is expected to act on the advice of professionals who have public interest obligations to their profession, such as those included in the *Foresters Act* (2003).

Second, professional reliance is not the panacea for everything in forestry. The prescriptive nature of the *Forest Practices Code* stifled innovation and caused significant bureaucracy. This experience for government and industry created a collective eagerness toward changing to less constraining alternative. A results-based system became the answer and the comfort or certainty in quickly moving to such a system was predicated on following professional advice. However, professional reliance, if correctly applied, is but one piece of achieving *Forest and Range Practices Act* (FRPA) success.

Third, there is often a mix-up between professional advice and the rights of government or licensees to make decisions about activities on forest lands. This is particularly true in the case of the public who often believe that the professionals are the decision makers under FRPA; in the same way that a physician will be your advisor and surgeon. However, this is not the case in forest management. FRPA changed the way that forest management decisions were made in BC. It left the identification of objectives on forest land as the responsibility of government and transferred the forest practice decisions to meet these objectives to the licensee. The government and the licensees hold the power of decision on forest land. Both roles still require regulated professionals to undertake the practice of professional forestry and provide their professional judgment and advice.

Finally, professional reliance is not being applied correctly in some cases. The model is designed to illicit professional advice that is a balanced opinion using knowledge of natural ecological systems. In some cases, organizations are beginning with the outcome they prefer and not allowing the professional advice to develop. To use simplified examples from other professions: If a person seeks the advice of a physician, and pre-empts that advice by telling the doctor what he/she wants to hear, then the advice is biased toward a pre-designed outcome. Similarly, if a person overloads an accountant with work, then the finance tasks will not be as thorough or complete, and unexpected outcomes can occur. The implementation of FRPA has created a situation where some organizations expect greater forest management freedom and other organizations expect more rigorous control of forest practices; and each expect professional service to deliver their preferred outcome.

The fact is professional reliance cannot be stripped down to the question, 'Does it work or doesn't it work?' Using science-based knowledge of dedicated professionals, as managers of natural forested systems, will always work. This is because using advanced skill accelerates success and reduces risk beyond that of applying common knowledge or skill. For the public, companies and government who want to use natural systems for a variety of values, the more relevant question is "Are we as government, industry or public listening to the professional opinion? Are we allowing the professional advice to develop, form part of, and direct forest management?"

We began this conversation as a discussion of a problem. It is also about building on early successes. It has been ten years of FRPA management after 90 years of a government-centered management regime. Professional reliance is working, and there is still much to do in making the FRPA framework successful. The ABCFP makes the following suggestions to provide improvements.

- a) Government direct resources toward providing clear objectives for all land in BC.
- b) Employers in natural resource management use a disciplined approach to establishing an operating environment that ensures they receive professional advice. It is when

employers follow the committed and unencumbered use of the registered professional work that they correctly apply professional reliance.

- c) Employers invest the time in applying professional reliance and in the professionals that are required to provide the professional judgement. Building the culture of professional reliance in FRPA and the professional's role is a longer term process.
- d) The professions will continue to engage employers and stakeholders in the acceptable application of professional reliance.

The FPB Bulletin points out that professional reliance is not new to society and is not new to forestry. The expectations are high that the FRPA, in combination with professional legislations, can deliver the kind of forest resource management that government, industry and the public expect.