



Long term sustainability of B.C.'s forest lands not a Liberal government priority

Future historians will look back at these times and identify when British Columbia's politicians began abrogating their responsibilities toward safeguarding the health of the public's forest lands.

Those historians, aided by the clarity of hindsight, will point to the years of provincial government inertia spent twiddling its thumbs hoping for cold winters, while the mountain pine beetle infestation in the interior mushroomed into Canada's worst known forest health disaster.

But the provincial governments have learned little from that recent history, judging by their recent inactions. Indeed, the present Liberal government has responded to the challenges of restoring the health of forest ecosystems in the province by consistent neglect and erosion of funding levels.

The latest evidence of this was more bloodletting among personnel at the Ministry of Forests and Range. A further 204 layoff notices were handed out in April to ministry staff across the province. A district office in Prince Rupert will be permanently shut down.

The Liberals have tabled a \$1.7 billion deficit budget for this year. The deficit is a result of the world-wide financial melt-down and official under-estimation of anticipated government revenues. And let's not get even close to the ticking time bomb of pre-Olympic Winter Games expenditures endorsed by the province.

The need to cut budget costs and a drop in harvest levels in the province were cited by government as justification for the latest forests ministry job losses. Well now, it's indisputable that harvesting levels have been considerably reduced. Hardly surprising, given the worst combination of factors to simultaneously assault the forest industry in the better part of half a century.

But forest ministry staff have reason to feel slighted by the inference that all they do is approve company cutting permits. The forest ministry mandate is far broader and more significant.

It is supposed to be the most focused eyes, ears and expertise dedicated to the overall management of an invaluable publicly-owned resource. Systematically gutting the ministry's ability to fulfill that function is more than mildly worrisome and represents a dangerous precedent.

The contrary argument to the government's personnel cuts can be easily made: that now is the time when we need more—not fewer—skilled forest professionals representing the public's interests.

The forest landscape has profoundly changed in the aftermath of the pine beetle devastation and through other and continuing effects of a warming climate. What's out there? Do we have any accurate idea? We're not just talking computer simulations here: the forest industry needs and the public should be demanding that we come to grips with the collection and interpretation of solid, on-the-ground data. How can we possibly make cogent management decisions without it? We



can't.

The Association of B.C. Forest Professionals is among the groups to recognize this. It has produced reports urging the government to pay attention to sound forest stewardship practices by acquiring the basic inventory information it needs. It's really simple: you've got to know what you've got before you can begin to manage it.

But clearly the Liberal government has its own priorities. And it appears the long term sustainability of the province's forest lands is not of their number.

Other forest management practices have and are continuing to suffer through government cuts, apart from the collection, interpretation and application of stewardship data. The latest round of ministry cuts wandered from administration into other areas, including the enforcement and compliance functions.

"When the Liberals switched to 'results based' forest management in 2002, they made an explicit promise to increase compliance and enforcement to ensure our public resource was being managed in the public interest. Another 22 people are being laid off from compliance and enforcement this year," observes Bob Simpson, MLA for Cariboo North and a one-time forestry critic for the NDP.

Unfortunately, there's still more evidence of the Liberal government's cavalier attitude toward the future of the forest industry in B.C.

There's a major reforestation crisis out there.

What's happening, in short, is while the need for replanting has more than doubled during the last 10 years, investment levels into reforestation are drier than a dead pine tree.

Public reforestation investments were slashed by more than \$40 million between 2001 and 2004. Or, to put it in a different perspective, while the public dollars invested in replanting decreased by more than 90 per cent, the inventory of dead trees increased by about 900 per cent, according to available data that is likely to err on the incomplete side.

An improvement in planting levels during the last couple of years doesn't change an uncomfortable truth. Twenty years ago, B.C. was investing six times the dollar amount to plant 31 times the average number of seedlings, largely in response to an NSR backlog.

Today, our new NSR lands are continuing to grow, according to Ministry of Forests data revealed last fall. The ministry has discovered an astonishing estimate of an additional 700,000 hectares of public forest in the province that is now deemed in need of reforestation. (See above to 'explain' these figures).

So who knows if that's the accurate or complete figure? Maybe there's a few more thousands of hectares of unaccounted and devastated forest lands out there. Given the Liberal regime in Victoria's present agenda and spending priorities, it clearly has little interest in finding out.