BUILDING BRIDGES: WUIKINUXV NATION AND THE JOHNSON CREEK PROJECT

By Hans Peter Meyer

We're in the dining room on the Interfor barge camp at Johnson Creek, south of Rivers Inlet on BC's mid-coast. Ted Walkus is showing us pictures of the Chinook that return to the Whonnock River each year—seventy and eighty pound monsters. We're impressed.

These Whonnock tyee mean more than just a healthy return on a salmon stream to Walkus. The Hereditary Chief of his family in the Wuikinuxv Nation, Walkus is proud of the work being done at the Whonnock hatchery. The monster fish are emblematic of a rebirth for his community, because the health of the Wuikinuxv Nation is intimately tied to the natural resources of their territory.

That's one of the reasons Walkus is so positive about what's happening with the current project on Johnson Creek. It represents a new way of doing business with the forest industry. Walkus says the project, managed by Corby Lamb and Capacity Forest Management, is respectful of Wuikinuxv Nation claims and values. At the same time, it's meeting the financial bottom line for the parties in the joint venture—the Wuikinuxv Nation, Interfor and the TLA contractors who are engineering, road building and logging the project.

Lamb has been managing Kvamua Enterprises, the forestry arm of the Wuikinuxv Nation Economic Development Corporation (WEDCO) for about 14 years. Before that he'd established a reputation for establishing positive relations with First Nations on Haida Gwaii and the mid-coast in various roles with Western Forest Products. Today his company, Capacity Forest Management, works exclusively with First Nations clients, with a roster of 15 clients and 45 licences on the coast and in the Interior.

History

The road to today's positive joint venture experience wasn't a smooth one. Walkus relates how the reserve he lives on was logged off for spruce to feed the airplane industry in WWII. That decision was made by the Indian Agent. Years of log dumps and flat raft booming in salmon rivers followed. "This had a

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negative impact on our community," he says. Then, in 1995, Johnson Creek was the site of an environmental blockade by Forest Action Network.

When First Nations were allocated access to timber through Bill 28 things began to change. But that change wasn't without hiccups. The learning curve associated with getting involved in forestry was steep. After going through four CEOs, by 2011 Kvamua was in financial difficulty.

Capacity has a history of turning difficult situations around. Supported by a new CEO and board, they were able to successfully negotiate a collaborative business-to-business arrangement with Interfor that meets the needs of both Kvamua and Interfor. Ironside Contracting and Storey Creek Trading, which also has 14 years of experience with Kvamua, were brought on board to create the basis for what is now a successful project start up.

Tim Walley from Storey Creek says the current Johnson Creek project works "because there's a willingness from all parties to make it work." Lamb notes another important difference: "This version is a little different from other joint ventures, because now WEDCO and Kvamua control the joint venture." That's critical to Ted Walkus. "It's important that we have some say with what happens in our territory."

Community

The primary value of this project for Walkus is its value to his community. Creating jobs in a region where there are few opportunities is critical. Opening up opportunities for Wuikinuxv youth to be engaged in higher level understanding about managing resources is fundamental. As is getting a return for forest industrial activity.

Walkus credits Lamb personally with playing an important role. Not only on the business side, but in helping the community become positively involved in the industry and get past previous bad industry experiences. Rhiannon Poupard, Manager of First Nations & Forestry Partnerships with Interfor echoes this

This First Nations partnership means economic stability for these men's communities too which are far from Rivers Inlet.

when she says that Capacity's "expertise is valuable to have at the table."

Stability

It wasn't that long ago that the forest industry felt exposed by unresolved issues related to First Nations' land claims. Then, for a while, uncertainty around these issues appeared to be lessening. For its part, industry was looking to a range of different partnerships as a way to provide a degree of much-needed stability, something that *Truck LoggerBC* magazine has been documenting over the past several issues. The recent Tsilhqot'in Decision was a significant development regarding land claims. Although the decision has stirred new feelings of uncertainty, the collaborative atmosphere remains strong in Johnson Creek.

Poupard notes the Tsilhqot'in Decision is a game-changer. "It's certainly highlighted the need for government to approach reconciliation in a more meaningful manner than what has been achieved to date." She believes industry has an important role to play in working with both First Nations and the government on the path to reconciliation and points to the Johnson Creek project as an example of how this can be achieved. "The world did change [with the Tsilhqot'in Decision]. But we were already working towards the world that the decision describes."

"All the Central Coast Nations have been operating like the decision was already in place," Lamb says. "The decision just confirms their position." He agrees with Poupard, when she says that industry and First Nations have been working along the lines defined by the Tsilhqot'in Decision for the past five years. "The Decision has added strength to what we are doing."

As the dust settles after the Tsilhqot'in Decision, joint ventures like the Johnson Creek project are being seen as the way to create stability. Lamb is blunt in his assessment: "You're not going to work on the mid-coast without First Nations partnerships."

We decided with all parties, if we can't do it right, let's not do it. We want this to be an example of what a First Nations joint venture could look like. That was our motivation.

The project is helping to provide a secure log supply for Interfor, a company that operates two sawmills on the BC coast. Logs from Johnson Creek will supply the company's Hammond cedar mill. "All of our tenures for our Canadian operations are within the traditional territories of First Nations," says Poupard. "Recognition of aboriginal rights, including title and respect for interests within these territories is integral to how we conduct our business." She underlines the importance of developing good working relations with First Nations. "Their success is our success."

"It's about stability, secure access to timber," says Lamb. Ironside Contracting's Gord Thompson concurs. "For us, it's about job security. We've worked on a lot of First Nations partnerships that have been very successful for everyone involved. The licensee gets a portion of the wood, the First Nations get enough margin to make it profitable and they get some employment. And we get the work." First Nations work accounted for approximately 40 per cent of Ironside's work in 2014. Thompson estimates that will grow to about 50 per cent in 2015. "These are pretty big projects that we're involved in. As far as more opportunities with other First Nations, absolutely there's room to expand."

Challenges

While the challenges that were daunting seven to 10 years ago have been overcome, Lamb says a number of challenges remain. One is bureaucracy, due to the multiple levels of government and departments involved. Another is small volumes. "None of these bands have enough volume to have a sustainable forest operation."

Truck Loggers & First Nations

The TLA's Aboriginal Affairs committee asks questions and develops answers to keep the TLA informed on First Nations forestry issues so we can keep our members informed and up-to-date. The Aboriginal Affairs committee already developed a TLA position statement on the Tsilhqot'in Decision that we launched at our convention in January (www.tla.ca/tsilhqotin).

They are now working on a guiding principles document around First Nations partnerships which will be released later this year. Building up to this guiding principles document, we have been highlighting existing TLA/First Nations partnerships in past issues of the magazine and there's an article in this issue on page 44 highlighting another partnership on the mid-coast. To see all the articles in this series, visit

www.tla.ca/FirstNations.

Ted Walkus believes the critical part of what's happening in Johnson Creek isn't just the financial bottom line, it's the future.

Then there's training. "Our primary function is to create wealth for the First Nations leadership, to create other assets in the community," Lamb says. "Training is part of that. But we don't get any training funding." That means all training is part of project costs.

Thompson also says that the non-renewable licenses are a downside with First Nations partnerships. "You've made a big investment to be up the coast. You ramp up, train and hire people. If the work doesn't continue, you've got to move people. And that's expensive."

Capacity's logging supervisor Marcel Rivard sums up the challenges by pointing to the quality of people involved. "If anyone says it's easy, it isn't. You've got to have the right group of people. There must be mutual trust, respect and compatible interests amongst the stakeholders to even start a conversation."

"One of my Western supervisors once said to me, 'You must have a cast iron gut for risk,'" says Lamb. "It helps to have others with you. Like Storey Creek. They were the first to believe in these partnerships. We work with other companies as well now, but they were the first and they continue to broker the major portion of First Nation volume we manage."

Looking Forward

A decade ago unsettled land claims issues, and changes wrought by Bill 28, created uncertainty for everyone involved in BC's coastal forest industry. We're beginning to see a more mature situation. Leadership in First Nations, in major licensees like Interfor, and in TLA member companies like Storey Creek Trading and Capacity Forest Management is demonstrating that trust-building has taken place. Even with the game-changing Tsilhqot'in Decision there's evidence that there's money to be made in First Nations forestry partnerships. This money is helping to grow local economies in remote coastal communities. It's sustaining contractors and their families elsewhere on the coast. It's supplying logs to BC sawmills. It's also showing how conflict and fear can be transcended—when the right bunch of people get together with a common purpose and lots of mutual respect.

Ted Walkus is philosophical about what the current partnerships with the forest industry mean for his community. "We've been here for 10,000 years. We know how to survive here." The critical part of what's happening in Johnson Creek isn't just the financial bottom line, it's the future.

"In the summer we've got 30 to 40 kids running around the community," Walkus says, "reconnecting with their traditional territory. These kids could potentially be working here. That's why we're doing this. For our kids, for our grandkids." In the meantime, TLA members like Capacity Forest Management, Storey Creek Trading, Ironside Contracting, and RSD Road Building are finding that First Nations partnerships are also part of their business sustainability, which means economic stability for their communities far from Rivers Inlet.