

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES: STANDING UP FOR BC'S FOREST SECTOR

By Doug Donaldson, Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development



At the time of writing, I've had the privilege of being the Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development for four months. It's been an intense four months. It's not every day you become the minister responsible in the middle of what would turn out to be the longest state of emergency in the province's history.

I was extremely proud of the efforts of our firefighters, emergency responders and volunteers who worked tirelessly to keep British Columbians safe. Remarkably, there was not a single life lost as a direct result of the wildfires. I was also impressed by the resilience of British Columbians and how everyone worked together to keep each other safe. I'd like to think that is what we are about as a government—working together to make life better for all British Columbians.

We began recovery efforts while the fires were still burning, working with local communities and First Nations and co-ordinating government activities in four key areas: people and communities, the economy, the environment, and infrastructure and reconstruction. Close to half of the 1.2 million hectares that burned were on the timber harvesting land base, and we lost millions of cubic metres of timber. Ministry staff are now working with First Nations and licensees to harvest burnt timber while it still holds value. In addition to helping licensees haul wood to mills, staff are also prioritizing areas for reforestation and wildlife habitat restoration. We're working to mitigate the impacts on mid-term timber supply for the next generation.

In order to keep people and property safe, we need to learn from this year's devastating wildfires. To that end, we've commissioned an independent review of both the fires and floods so we can determine what went well and what could have been done better. We will work to implement the resulting recommendations in advance of the 2018 wildfire season.

While it seems that the wildfires have been our sole focus since July, my mandate as Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development is one that I was thrilled to get from Premier Horgan and I'm excited to explore and leverage the opportunities that forestry holds. At the time of writing, I'm about to embark on my first forestry trade mission to China and Japan. In light of the softwood lumber dispute with the US, it's more important than ever that we continue to diversify markets for BC wood products both at home and abroad. That means expanding the growth in China, Japan and India.

That also means expanding the innovative wood products sector. BC has the expertise to be a leader in engineered wood products. You only have to look at some of the amazing structures we've built here with wood—such as the Brock Commons student residence at the University of British Columbia. At 18 storeys, it currently is the tallest contemporary wood structure in the world. Ten years ago, did anyone think that an 18-storey wood-frame structure would be a reality? Who knows what the next great innovation in wood will be. We need to keep pushing new ideas and look for opportunities for commercialization. BC wood products are high quality, and building with wood also has a carbon benefit.

An initiative I know TLA members welcome is the logging contractor sustainability review. George Abbott expects to have his final report to me by the end of January 2018, with recommendations on ways we can adjust the regulatory environment to improve the sustainability of contractors and the competitiveness of licensees.

I am impressed by the work done to date—George and his team have done a thorough job and are asking the right

questions. They met with 160 logging contractors from every corner of BC, all the major licensees, industry associations and organizations such as Forestry Innovation Investment and FPInnovations. And I'm told they had some great feedback, with open and supportive conversations. That's important because this is a tough issue, and we need to be open-minded if we expect to find solid solutions.

I'm also excited to be Minister of Rural Development and working for ways to strengthen rural economies in a meaningful and lasting way. I believe, that to be successful, rural development needs to be grounded in five community economic development principles: self-reliance, meaning an increase of economic independence for communities; community-based, meaning facilitating community control on rural development; sustainability, so communities are resilient for the long term; asset based, meaning building on existing resources, talents and skills in the community; and participatory participation, meaning that everyone has a voice in developing the right strategy for that community.

The same participatory principle applies to modernizing land use planning and implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. BC's approach to advancing long-term reconciliation is focused on building respectful government-to-government relationships, and improving opportunities and outcomes for Indigenous people in BC. Modernized land use planning will provide new land use direction that responds to new resource development pressures, ensures BC's environmental resources remain healthy, and provides clarity and certainty for rural communities and economies and industry.

As the new minister, I have been given an ambitious mandate by the premier, and I also look forward to meeting those commitments. I look forward to meeting with you at your 75th annual convention in January and discussing the challenges and, more importantly, the opportunities before us.▲