

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: THE NORTHWEST PERSPECTIVE



"We're unique." "We're special." "We're not like the others."
"We have our own issues, and we need our own solutions."

While these are words that will cause concern for many bureaucrats, these are the reasons why there are associations representing the contractor workforce in the BC forest industry. Whether it's the Truck Loggers Association (TLA), the Interior Logging Association (ILA) in the southern Interior, or the North West Loggers Association (NWLA) representing those in northwest BC, contractors' issues can be regional or provincial and the advocacy work that is needed to address each will differ.

As a business owner in northwest BC and as the executive director of the Skeena-Nass Centre for Innovation in Resource Economics (SNCIRE), I have worked with the NWLA for many years. NWLA speaks on behalf of the many contractors and associated businesses that have continuously been in "survival mode" in the northwest for twenty years, ever since the collapse of Repap, the primary corporate licensee. Repap's failure was a symptom of the core issues in the northwest, which include the economic utilization of forests with 50 per cent or more "fibre quality" logs (i.e. not sawlogs) and stumpage inconsistencies that work against the financial realities we face, all the while trying to get the attention of a government focused on fires, beetles, climate change, and softwood lumber.

The NWLA advocates for solutions to these northwest BC issues. While some solutions may be unique to the northwest, others may also benefit the entire province. By being aware of each other's issues, BC contractors' associations can work together on those that need broader attention, while at the same time ensuring the regional focus on local issues is not lost.

There is great value in the NWLA, the ILA, and the TLA working closely together, for three key reasons. First, so that the common issues are worked

on together. Second, to recognize that even when dealing on common issues, regional focus may be needed to address the diversity of the forests and contractors in each region. Third, to be aware of the issues unique to each region. Maintenance of this regional focus is why there is value in maintaining each association. The associations each have a long history of advocating for their members: the TLA for over 75 years, the ILA celebrating its 60th anniversary and the NWLA celebrating its 50th in 2018 (congratulations to all!).

Recent NWLA initiatives and advocacy include:

- Maintaining a focus on the small sawmill sector in the region to identify and help improve the conditions for their survival, thereby adding value to and diversifying the regional economy.
- Providing input to improvements to the stumpage system from local forest tenure holders, knowing that these improvements will ultimately result in more stability for NWLA members.
- Developing working relationships with other local groups. For instance, the NWLA and SNCIRE met with local provincial candidates before the last election to present potential solutions to the regional "fibre quality" issue.
- In 2010, the NWLA was instrumental in receiving \$2 million towards upgrade and repair of several main road systems in the Coast Mountains Resource District after the collapse of Repap. In 2017, one of these roads was washed away due to a major rain event and the NWLA is once again advocating for funding to rebuild the lost sections of this important multi-user road.

Looking forward, NWLA hopes to connect our membership with new First Nation tenure holders as they work to build capacity and potentially grow a new contractor force.

To those who find it hard to see value in association membership, consider the challenges in a region where the trees are still green, but are seen to be uneconomic; where stumpage for the same forest stand can shift from negative \$20 to positive \$20 just by crossing an imaginary line; where contractors are ecstatic when they can get an eight-month operating season; and where government says that a storm-damaged mainline Forest Service Road owned by the province is not their responsibility to repair; there are no shortages of challenges facing the northwest. The NWLA is your local advocate on these challenges, and that's why there's value for current and future members of the NWLA.▲

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