



## FOREST COMMUNITY: MACKENZIE

By Robin Brunet

Like all great BC logging towns, Mackenzie is surrounded by wood. Literally. To the point where although this community of 3,700 people has diversified its economy, the forests remain its key source of prosperity.

Being nestled within this resource also has its challenges, as exemplified by the provincial government's proposed Caribou Recovery Agreement (which will guard a portion of the land base against not only industrial activity but could also potentially impact recreational snowmobile access), the threat of wildfires (which last year closed Highway 39, Mackenzie's only means of evacuation) and the large number of logs

leaving the Mackenzie Timber Supply area to be processed in other communities.

But if outsiders perceive Mackenzie as being vulnerable to the hazards of 21st century living, the response of its mayor, Joan Atkinson, is "We are a resilient community and I'm confident we'll be able to deal with whatever comes our way."

Atkinson, a former Ontarian who moved to Mackenzie in 1997 due to her husband's work, isn't speaking as a politician, but instead as someone who fell in love with the community early on. "What struck me the most about Mackenzie besides its natural beauty was that everyone looks out for each

other," she says. "That remains our great strength today. It's led to collaborations that have benefitted our community, and it's made us attractive to new residents seeking a simpler—and far more affordable—way of life."

A great example of a successful business collaboration is the McLeod Lake Mackenzie Community Forest, a partnership between the McLeod Lake Indian Band and the district of Mackenzie, which in the last three years has generated \$3.2 million in shareholder equity, evenly distributed between the two parties. "The Band used their share to develop infrastructure, and Mackenzie's share

helped to partially fund the upgrades to our recreation centre, which is a community hub,” says Atkinson. “It houses an aquatic centre, weight and cardio rooms, ice arena, climbing wall, child’s play area, community hall and our public library.”

Another great strength of Mackenzie compared to other locales is that it’s young, with a corresponding vitality that suggests its best years may still lie ahead. The town (strictly speaking, a district municipality) came about after the provincial forest service in the early 1960s built a road from ‘the junction’ (where Highway 97 meets Highway 39) to Finlay Forks. Given the sudden access to abundant forest resources and the availability of local power, BC Forest Products and Alexandra Forest Industries Ltd. announced in 1964 that they would build a \$60 million dollar forestry complex in the region, with pulp mills, sawmills, and other logging operations.

As part of this development, Mackenzie was incorporated in 1966 under the *Instant Town Act* by Alexandra Forest Industries (later acquired by BC Forest Products), and Cattermole Timber (which later partnered with Jujo Paper in 1970 to create Finlay Forest Industries). The initial purpose of the community was simply to house workers.

Today, Canfor, Conifex and Paper Excellence are Mackenzie’s largest employers, providing over 800 well-paid jobs to Mackenzie residents. “The community also benefits from the operation of smaller sawmills, and on the ground from loggers, log haul drivers, forest professionals and seasonal silviculturalists,” says Atkinson.

But Mackenzie in 2019 is hardly just an industry town, even though it still prominently displays the world’s largest tree crusher (a 175-ton machine that was used to clear non-merchantable timber from the Rocky Mountain Trench during the building of the W.A.C. Bennett Dam). As with so many rural BC communities, it is becoming a tourist destination and especially a winter playground, with ice fishing, downhill skiing, snowshoeing, and nearly forty kilometres of quiet, groomed cross-country ski trails all available within the town limits.

Mackenzie’s ability to weather hard times became most apparent during the economic downturn of 2008, which caused the town’s then biggest employer,

AbitibiBowater Inc., to close two sawmills and a paper mill, wiping out 560 jobs. The pulp mill owned by Pope & Talbot went bankrupt, throwing another 230 people out of work, and Mackenzie soon earned headlines for being Ground Zero of the province’s economic woes.

Atkinson recalls, “It was a devastating time, but we picked ourselves up, and in some ways re-invented ourselves. A perfect example of this is the Conifex (formerly AbitibiBowater) newsprint facility, which closed during the downturn: it was converted into a biomass power plant utilizing existing infrastructure. The biomass plant consumes residual and former waste products, which means full optimization of sawlog fibre.”

Paper Excellence engaged law firm Miller Titerle + Company to make a deal that would bring the Mackenzie pulp mill back to life. The facility’s original owner

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had become insolvent in 2008, and a few former employees kept the mill’s boiler running over the winter in order to preserve its integrity.

MT+Co co-founder Jim Titerle notes that these employees purchased a front end loader and used it to deliver wood chips to the boiler, all without pay: “These unsung heroes saved the mill and their town.” Paper Excellence bought the mill in 2010.

While the downturn is now just an unpleasant memory, Mackenzie faces new challenges, one of the foremost being the agreement between BC and Ottawa under Section 11 of Canada’s *Species at Risk Act* that applies to all southern mountain caribou in the province. The agreement outlines some immediate recovery measures for South Selkirk and South Purcell herds, as well as a three-year recovery plan.

Under this plan, it has been determined that 100,000 cubic metres will be removed from the Mackenzie Timber Supply Areas’ Annual Allowable Cut of 4.5 million cubic metres (which, incidentally, is widely expected to be downgraded to three million after assessments are completed this year, due to pine beetle-infested wood—which led to the AAC

being increased in 2014—having largely been processed). “It’s still unclear exactly what will be accessible and what will be off-limits, but the biggest problem we face is lack of trust between government and the communities this initiative will affect,” says Atkinson.

As leaders of numerous regions gird themselves to accommodate the Caribou initiative, Mackenzie is taking a pro-active approach to solving another issue. “The wildfire south of our community last June that virtually cut off the only route out of Mackenzie, identified a potential risk for all residents,” says Atkinson. “Fortunately we were in the final stages of updating our Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), so we were ready to tackle this issue.

“In late August, the Mackenzie Wildfire Advisory Committee was formed, which has identified the need to work on the

reduction of fuels on either side of the highway leading out of town. The Community Forest is funding the hiring of a wildfire coordinator who will work on implementing the 37 recommendations of the CWPP, which will reduce the risk of our town being devastated by any future fires.”

Having already proven their resiliency a decade ago, Mackenzie residents are confident that their prosperity will continue—and unlike in the past, they have economic diversification to support them, including Centerra Gold’s Mount Milligan mine employing several dozen people, and an emerging tourism industry. “Our community is a great and safe place to live, work and play, with affordable housing, good paying jobs and incredible recreational opportunities,” says Atkinson. “Currently, 35 percent of our tax dollars are reinvested in community services to help make our town more appealing to newcomers who are considering living and working here.”

The mayor concludes, “We’ve been through a lot, and being a small rural resource community means we will continue to face challenges. Issues will evolve, but our determination will not.”▲