



MAKING LIFE BETTER

The tagline for the BC government's 2019 fiscal budget, "Making Life Better" might be missing the mark with a reported shortfall of \$133 million for the second quarter of their fiscal year due to reduced revenues in the forest sector. With even less timber harvesting since October, the impact of a forest industry in crisis should finally be landing squarely within the halls of the BC legislature. Along with it, should be the message that the forest sector is integral to the livelihoods of those who work in our forests and their communities.

Large budget shortfalls from a specific source such as the forest sector makes headlines. As of late, so too has the frustration of timber harvesting contractors and their workers on numerous occasions.

Social media has been highly effective in fueling a grassroots uprising. The BC Logging Convoy was organized in a matter of days, and in late September saw over 400 trucks converge in downtown Vancouver from as far away as Vanderhoof. The largest and unintentional impact of this convoy was its inspiration for others in this province to follow suit.

Late November saw coastal loggers rally to have their voice heard in Campbell River on two occasions within one week. The first was when the Wilderness Committee planned a public meeting to discuss management of old-growth forests, which was met with the timber harvesting community from across northern Vancouver Island mobilizing to share their views.

Shortly after, a meeting of constituents in the North Island riding with their MLA turned into a raucous townhall style gathering with some 80 contractors expressing frustration over forest policy and the United Steelworkers and Western Forest Products (USW/WFP) strike.

As I write this in mid-December, the coastal logging community descended on the grounds of the BC legislature, yet again, in an attempt to express their frustration with government over the prolonged outage from the USW/WFP strike and the state of the forest sector. We were pleased to hear Premier Horgan's immediate response stating government will be looking at ways to assist those affected.

All that to say, timber harvesting contractors are fed up as they watch their way of life, their livelihoods, and their communities suffer from relentless hits to their industry. Life is not better for them.

Since July 2019, a canary in the coal mine indicator of potential problems has been BC Timber Sales' 13 no-bid timber sales on the Coast, which is an abnormal number. Three of those no-bids were repeated and again failed to sell. What we know is that markets have been weak, and new forest policies were implemented during that time.

To be fair, many of today's issues were not caused by the current, or any government, but can be attributed to the USW/WFP strike; 20 per cent duties on softwood lumber exports to the United States, market conditions in China, and Interior timber supply reductions due to mountain pine beetle. However, they all relate to a publicly owned resource—our provincial forest.

The NDP government's vision is to transform the forest industry. Its goals are to use more BC logs in domestic manufacturing facilities; increase value-added production; and leave less waste behind after harvesting to support pulp and paper mills. Bottomline, the government wants to sustain and create more jobs from our forests. Unfortunately, a stick is being used to shape the industry into this vision.

That vision seems confounded when it relies on a working forest, yet there seems to be relentless initiatives such as species-at-risk reviews, caribou habitat set-asides, land use planning processes, and an old growth strategic review, which all could potentially reduce the amount of working forest, increase costs for industry, and therefore reduce jobs. Why aren't we meeting with government to discuss how to expand our working forest, reduce costs, and increase jobs?

The general sense of the TLA membership is that government is working against the industry rather than supporting it. My recommendation is to have a vision, but how it is achieved is just as important as the end goal. An industry in convulsions is a telling signal. Take a phased-in approach, which helps to react to unintended consequences. Learn from how implementation on the Coast might be modified when considering recommendations that will come from the Interior Forest Sector Renewal process.

These protests are an attempt to raise awareness that there are problems. To be successful in seeing a vision come to reality, government needs to walk with industry, as it transitions. The tagline of "Making Life Better" should also apply to those that work in our forests, but so far, we are going in the wrong direction. What would make life better for contractors is to work on George Abbott's recommendations to address contractor sustainability.

One final comment, this will be my last Executive Director's message. I have truly valued the many notes of appreciation and support over the last five years. Thank you for reading my articles.▲

David Elstone, RPF, Executive Director, TLA
 Tel: 604-684-4291 ext. 1
 Email: david@tla.ca