

GRASSROOTS CONVOY SEEKS RESULTS

By Adrienne Tanner

BC's September logging truck protest, the largest in recent memory, was cooked up over a cup of coffee at the Merritt home of Howard McKinnon, owner of a logging truck business and 45-year veteran of BC's forest industry. His friend, fellow hauler and business owner Frank Etchart, had dropped by and as always, talk turned to the industry downturn killing jobs in Merritt and other communities dependent on forestry province-wide. McKinnon himself hadn't worked in five months. Merritt's local mill, Aspen Planers, had planned to harvest a large volume of timber near Lillooet over the summer, but skyrocketing stumpage fees and plummeting lumber prices meant there was too little profit to be made on the wood. The mill curtailed production until the math improves. That was devastating news for McKinnon, who had geared up in the spring, believing business would be booming. "I bought two more trucks.

I'm sitting here with egg on my face with very few trucks working."

The two men felt they had to do something to raise awareness of problems endemic to BC's forest industry. McKinnon had helped organize a 1994 logging truck rally to Victoria and suggested it might be time for another. He and Etchart knew the annual Union of BC Municipalities Convention was happening in Vancouver the following week. The gathering, which is attended by municipal politicians and a smattering of MLAs from across BC, presented an ideal opportunity to make their concerns heard. So, the next day they put out a social media callout urging logging truck operators to roll into the heart of downtown Vancouver for a rally outside the convention on Wednesday, September 25. At such short notice, McKinnon wasn't counting on a huge turnout. "But there was an overwhelming response from just about every community north

of Merritt, and some south too," he says. When the numbers hit 200, McKinnon and Etchart called the RCMP, knowing a convoy of that size would require a police escort. By Tuesday, the day before the rally, they'd had responses from between 350 and 400 drivers planning to attend.

Among them was Laura Christy, of Merritt, whose family has three generations actively working in the forest industry. Logging is practically in her blood. Her father, Fred Lowe has been driving a logging truck since the early sixties. "My dad had two daughters and so I went with him everywhere. I could hardly wait for a day off from school to go in a truck." Today, Christy and her husband own a company that runs two low beds used to move logging equipment, and two logging trucks. Christy's sister is an office manager for a trucking company and her husband builds roads for a Merritt logging company. And for



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the past six years, Christy's son has driven a logging truck as well. "So, we're all tied to it."

Christy says since 2011, her customer list has shrunk by half. "There's been half a dozen prime logging contractors in our area that have either shut down, sold or just folded." Loggers in Merritt must now travel farther afield to find work, including her son who takes jobs that separate him from his wife and one-year-old because there is little work close by. "You do what you have to do to put food on the table," Christy says. The downturn has had a ripple effect throughout the entire town. Sponsorships for hockey and baseball teams, typically donated by forest companies, are harder to come by, she says. "The money is just not there." Even Christy's girlfriend, who is a hairdresser, reports her business is feeling the pinch. For all these reasons, there was no question Christy and her family would sign on

for the rally. "My husband and I went in a pickup. My husband's sister drove one of our trucks."

"It was such an emotional day to see all the trucks and all the people at the side of the road from Merritt to Vancouver cheering us on."

Jerry Canuel, a retired chief forester from Merritt who worked in the business for 42 years, helped organize the rally and write speaking notes that clearly identified the issues and demands. He says current stumpage fees, which are in part calculated and adjusted yearly, are currently too high. The data used in the calculations stretches back over a 10-year period, and over time the market has shifted, Canuel says. At today's lumber prices, the numbers don't work. "It's put most company's quota wood offside and they cannot afford to put their loggers to work."

The loggers want BC to adopt something more like Alberta's system to avoid the boom and bust cycles. There, stump-

age is calculated on a timelier basis and reflects stumpage rates significantly lower than those charged in BC, Canuel says. But BC has been reluctant to tinker with the system for fear any change would be viewed by the United States as an unfair subsidy and reignite the softwood lumber wars, Canuel says. "Loggers and independent mill owners cannot afford to wait as their livelihood and that of many entire communities are teetering on the brink of collapse."

The Facebook post calling on participants to join the rally ricocheted across the Province. In Prince George, when a



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friend asked Cole Thorne if he was planning to attend, there was no hesitation. Thorne called his boss who encouraged him to make the trip. "It's costing us to haul logs," says Thorne. "That's not the way it's supposed to work. A guy is supposed to go to work and make money." Thorne prepared for the trip by washing his truck. "You gotta look good—I take a lot of pride in my truck." He started at 6 pm, finished at 10 pm and started the drive south at 2 am."

People in towns along the route lined the streets cheering and holding signs of support, Thorne says. But the enormity of the rally really hit home when the convoy reached Merritt, where about 150 more trucks were waiting. "The RCMP had the town shut down for us to come in and we went into the cardlock, had a little get together and then took off down the Coquihalla to Vancouver. It was absolutely amazing." More supporters with banners were standing on top of every overpass. The truckers were heartened by the outpouring of support. "It was such an emotional day to see all the trucks and all the people at the side of the road from Merritt to Vancouver cheering us on," Christy says.

Overall, McKinnon feels the rally was a success and the loggers got their points across. Outside the Vancouver Convention Centre, the protesters were met by the entire opposition Liberal caucus and Forest Minister Doug Donaldson fielded some questions from the crowd. If there was one disappointment, it was that "Premier Horgan was in the building, but never did once come out," McKinnon notes. Thorne says he hopes the rally will get results. His first child was born just weeks after the rally and his livelihood depends on fair prices for lumber. He loves his job and hopes to remain in it for the long run but fears he won't be able to if things don't improve. He feels he did his bit by participating in the rally, saying, "You know, we had to make a point. We're not going to sit back and just watch our families go."▲

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2. Authority of contracts:
 - Determine who oversees the contracts and has signing authority.
3. Contract management:
 - Determine who locates and manages contractors and if there are obligations to create employment or small business ventures to conduct required work.
4. Insurance:
 - Errors & omissions
 - General liability
 - Professional liability
5. Rates for harvesting and road building:
 - Determine who negotiates and who accepts the market downside risks/upside gains.
 - Understand explicitly costings and profit resolutions.
6. Log sales:
 - Determine who markets the log.
7. Accounting:
 - Determine who pays the bills.
8. Dispute Resolution:
 - Understand how to resolve a dispute in payment, rates, or licensee management.
 - Determine who has the final decision-making authority.▲



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