

IS GOVERNMENT FINALLY LISTENING?



Soup kitchens. That's where the City of Fort St. John directed \$75,000 in provincial support for the municipality's struggling forestry workers; a clear indication that the backbone of the provincial economy is in crisis. The Premier and his ministers speak of the importance of this industry as a foundation of the economy, yet the crisis has not been adequately addressed. The men and women that for so long have contributed to our collective wealth are now accessing soup kitchens; families are going without an income; and businesses are struggling to remain solvent. Where is the action?

Government is well aware of this crisis and has certainly been engaging and listening to stakeholders about possible long- and short-term solutions. They are listening to communities, the manufacturing and contractor sectors, those who are affected, and yes, even to their own bureaucrats. Government is listening, but are they hearing us? The support packages previously announced of \$69 million for the BC Interior and \$5 million in support to contractors affected by the USW/WFP strike in the form of loans is, at best, a token action provided to an industry on its knees. One that provides 32 per cent of the province's export products and generates \$1.4 billion in direct revenues (not including corporate, personal or excise taxes). The forest industry has provided the province and its residents with many of the programs and services that we have come to expect. An industry where government has taken the money out of the forests without reinvesting in the health and management of the forest for a sustainable future. BC has now become one of the highest cost producers in the country and we are being told that the government's vision for the industry's future is optimistic, that we will work together, and that change and transformation will be difficult.

There have been many industry proponents, communities and ministry people that have engaged with government about what can be done and what can be fixed. We look to government as the main controller of the regulations and policies that oversee our public resource, with significant influence over how, or if, the industry can remain sustainable. Ellis Ross, MLA for Skeena hosted a Rethinking Forestry workshop in Terrace, where civic leaders, politicians, loggers, manufacturers, forest professionals, First Nations forest companies, and others came together to provide tangible actions to support the industry and communities. The solutions that were discussed included old ones that remain undone, and some new ones that recognize the potential for innovation and emerging opportunities in forest products in the global economy. The following are a few of the many solutions that were put forward for the northwest:

- Invest in upgrades of resource road infrastructure from the Resource Road Infrastructure Fund as secondary provincial highways to employ out-of-work contractors and loggers and better position our road systems for the safe and efficient use of all road users.
- Invest in stand management beyond the free-growing age to increase value, merchantability, and piece size, and to modify fuels in the urban interface for community protection.
- Invest in bioenergy and co-generation projects to utilize sub-merchantable material produced from harvest blocks, land development projects and forest management activities.
- Implement a stumpage ledger system where negative stumpage blocks are offset by positive stumpage blocks or allow for complete flexibility around the blending of cutblocks within a tenure licence.

- Recognize cost structures in the appraisal system such as road allowances in the Kispiox that do not reflect actual costs.
- Return to simplified (e.g. ocular) residue and waste surveys where there is no revenue risk to the province.
- Implement recommendations from the Contractor Sustainability Review to support contractor and industry sustainability, including amendments to Bill 13, changes to the arbitration process and removal of the fair market rate test. It's been a year since Premier Horgan announced his commitment to do this.
- Implement complete LiDAR coverage for the province that will provide a valuable tool for all resource management activities.
- Engage the federal government in being part of the effort by considering forestry tax credits, a lower corporate tax rate and an infusion of infrastructure investment, and forest stand enhancement dollars.

The NWLA is here to be a positive contributor to the changes necessary to safeguard the sustainability of the forest industry in the northwest and the communities in which we live. We have talked about these solutions as well as many others for what seems like a long time. We have talked, and government has listened. It is time for government to be bold, hear what has been said and move forward quickly on real and tangible initiatives. 🌲

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