A PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE OF THE FOREST INDUSTRY
By Paul Schuetz

Many who work in BC's forest industry are knowledgeable about the intricacies of forest economics, the impact the industry has on communities, and the relationship between forestry and the environment. But how is the forest industry perceived in the minds of other Canadians? Greg Lyle, president and founder of Innovative Research Group Inc. provided answers in vivid detail at the TLA's 77th Annual Convention + Trade Show. Since 1991, Lyle's national public research and engagement firm has been polling across Canada's business and political sectors on forestry and land management issues in BC and has done work for the TLA, major licensees, government agencies and community forests.

Lyle's presentation, entitled "A View from the Outside Looking In-What People Think," consisted of a plethora of graphs and data based on the recent polling results of over 2500 adult Canadians focused on the BC forest industry's reputation and image, and how it is perceived in the public eye. "In my world of politics, how people perceive things is more important than what's really true," says Lyle as he displays his first graph showing that BC Forestry has a favourable impression in the province with a +22 per cent rating, sitting in the middle of the pack among other industries.

When it came to the BC economy, forestry led the way with 31 per cent of those polled agreeing that it is the most important industry in BC. While forestry beat out technology and tourism (both at 27 per cent), the fact that in 2018 forestry directly employed over 54,000 people who generated $14.9 billion in commodity exports, this 31 per cent indicates some naivety among respondents about the impact this industry has in this province.

The most surprising statistic regarding forestry attitudes was that 58 per cent of people polled responded that 'whatever happens to the forest industry is not really relevant to the economic well-being of my family'. Meanwhile, 71 per cent of people agreed that 'developing our natural resources is key to BC's economic growth.' This disparity in attitude towards the relevance of forestry to the people of BC implies a lack of understanding towards the importance of the industry to the province and the revenues it generates for government.

Only 39 per cent of people polled believe that BC forests are managed sustainably (22 per cent disagree), 42 per cent agree with the claim that forestry harms the environment (33 per cent disagree), and 20 per cent of people polled would ban forestry altogether (55 per cent disagree).

The forestry questions demonstrated that residents of BC do not seem to understand or realize its importance in BC with respect to the revenues it generates that support the social programs, which many in southern BC rely on. While 72 per cent of respondents agreed that areas being managed for forestry could also be used for recreation, only 28 per cent would recommend forestry as a profession to a family or friend.

Needless to say, Lyle concludes that "as an industry, forestry is more positive than negative." However, we can do more by helping to educate the public. Whether by teaching it in schools, sponsoring school trips, or addressing and correcting the negative propaganda and misinformation that shows up in social media, it is a "long-term effort that has to happen across the sector."

Lyle showed that 61 per cent of the residents of BC believe that sustainable logging can be utilized to capture carbon in wood products to slow down the effects of climate change. He continues, "climate change provides an opportunity to reframe the environmental benefits of forestry. So, you have an opportunity by tying in both the federal and provincial agendas on climate change to get funding for initiatives or to get policy changes that would be seen as increasing Canada's contribution to climate change." This is a very bright light for the forest industry's image as a whole, and perhaps a precursor of how our industry will be perceived in the future.♠