

# TENURE REFORM FOR RURAL COMMUNITY STABILITY

By Jim Girvan, RPF, MBA

Tenure reform has been topical since the day Forest Management Licences (FML now TFL) were introduced by government in 1945. However, there has never been a situation so obvious as the recently-ended Western Forest Products (WFP) and United Steel Workers (USW) strike to demonstrate the folly in having so much timber under the corporate control of one entity.

The issue of tenure consolidation and the impacts on rural resource communities was the primary reason the TLA began advocating on behalf of independent timber harvesting contractors for fair forest policy in 1948.

For 77 years, it has been the TLA's position that consolidation is not good for the financial sustainability of all stakeholders in the forest industry. In 1948, the TLA submitted its first formal objection to the new tenure scheme to government against the imminent allocation of yet another FML. It contained several far-sighted predictions and warned of the dangers inherent in allowing the allocation of the

working forest land base into corporately controlled tenures. It argued that FMLs would become corporate monopolies and predicted that the owners of these licences would then move more of their operations into the public timber land base.

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As we look towards the new millenia and despite the allocation of 50 per cent of the working forest land base to TFLs, government states "BC is a world leader in sustainable forest management with leading-edge environmental practices. Owning 94 per cent of the land and forest resources lets us determine where, when and how forest resources can be used. The forest sector is a critical economic generator for BC. It supports healthy, stable communities, and provides jobs for tens of thousands of British Columbians."

What is important in this over-arching statement is that we "own" the forests and by government's own declaration, they are meant to provide jobs and promote stable communities. However, as we endured through the eight-month

labour dispute between WFP, who by virtue of the provincial tenure system have the right to harvest one-third of the provincially owned coastal timber supply, and the USW, who represent those who work for WFP, nothing could be further from the truth.

It appears that it is not government who has the right, but it was WFP and USW who were calling the shots to the detriment of thousands of workers across the BC coast.

As people dependent on the shared use of WFP's Crown tenures for their



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livelihood lost their houses and cars, suffered through family break-ups, and turned to food banks and the generosity of their communities to feed their families, one has to consider the legitimacy of having WFP control so much public timber when the dispute with the USW halted all operations on their tenures.

What is equally absurd is that all of those independent contractors who work for WFP and employ union labour were forced by the USW to sit on the sidelines while only direct WFP employees decided on what conditions constituted an appropriate collective agreement. Contractors couldn't access their equipment to potentially work other jobs and had no say in the outcome of the strike. They were simply collateral damage.

There are also all of the community businesses that support the forest industry that were hit hard by the strike to the point where many north island communities became virtual ghost towns as they waited for WFP and USW to come to terms. Clearly this is not what the government had in mind when they

suggested that BC's forests are a critical economic generator. If there was ever a time to realistically think about a new system of allocation of provincial harvesting rights, the strike has solidified this notion.

Speaking at the TLA convention, Minister Donaldson acknowledged that, "the concentration of tenure as a result of 2003 policy and legislative changes have exacerbated the impacts of the current strike," and that the NDP goal is to reverse some of these impacts. Using an analogy from his biology training, he noted, "diversity is the essence of survival" and we are seeing this with the impacts of the strike with tenure being "all in one pocket".

Does this suggest an NDP plan to diversify tenure at some point? Many hope so but this gives little consolation to those suffering today.

The long-term fix would be to separate timber harvesting rights from the manufacturing of timber products through a systematic transfer of cutting rights away from major tenure holders to community-based entities such as BC Timber

Sales, First Nations Woodland Licences and Woodlots.

If done, WFP and USW would still be free to negotiate employment terms while those who are dependent on the forest for their livelihoods would not suffer since they could continue to harvest and sell timber to other buyers, and in doing so prevent the appalling situation that took place in coastal communities.

Tenure diversification, increased community and First Nations involvement in the industry, a broader more robust market for logs, security of rural community employment and economic activity while preserving labour rights, sounds like a recipe for continued economic prosperity for BC's coast. All it would take is a government that is willing to see the injustice, not ignore it, speak out about it, and make a choice to make a difference. It is time for the next chapter. Now that the strike has ended, the people of BC's coast are willing to write it together with you.▲



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