

OPTIMISM AND OPPORTUNITY: TLA'S NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR BOB BRASH

By Adrienne Tanner



Three days after Bob Brash assumed his new role as executive director of the Truck Loggers Association, all non-essential businesses in BC were ordered to close if they couldn't meet social distancing restrictions. Starting a new job during an unprecedented world pandemic would be a daunting prospect for anyone, and Brash doesn't minimize the economic challenges posed by COVID-19. But after more than 30 years spent working in the forest industry, he has weathered a lot of ups and downs. "None of us has faced a challenge quite like COVID in our careers," he says. "So, it's different, but as an industry, we've faced similar challenges in our careers before."

BC's forest industry was already confronting huge challenges before the pandemic struck. In 2019, high stumpage fees and low lumber prices caused many lumber mills across the province to scale back production or shutter completely, throwing contractors out of work. In October, logging contractors organized a massive protest to drive home the severity of the situation. A cavalcade

of logging trucks from forestry towns spanning BC descended on downtown Vancouver to coincide with politicians gathered at the annual Union of BC Municipalities convention. This spring, BC's strategic review of old-growth logging is due for release, and its resulting recommendations may potentially impact the industry's future. COVID-19 presents yet more challenges as all workplaces struggle to find safe ways to continue production. Through all of this, it will be up to Brash to represent the TLA and ensure its members' voices are heard.

Those who have worked with Brash in the past say he is ideally suited to the task. Dr. Roslyn Kunin, an economist, first met Brash when she served as board chair of HaiCo, the Haida-owned enterprise corporation in Haida Gwaii. Brash started with the corporation's forestry arm, Taan Forest, and rose through the ranks to become CEO. "He's a very good businessperson, with very good business sense," Kunin says. "But secondly, and more importantly, he has superb people skills and could deal with diverse

people," she says. "This was important when we were running a Haida company and the company's owners were the Haida people."

Brash, 60, grew up immersed in the world of forestry. His father worked for the BC Forest Service and the family moved between forestry towns, small and large, across the province. His family lived in Fort St. James, Prince George, Prince Rupert and Brash graduated from high school in Nelson. Brash's father fell into forestry by chance; he had started out wanting to be a butcher but found he didn't have the stomach for it.

Brash hadn't planned on entering forestry either, at least not at first. He had worked a couple of summers with the Forest Service when his father was there. "At the time, nepotism was just fine," Brash recalls with a chuckle. But after graduation he headed to university planning to do an arts degree. After one year, he realized forestry was a better fit and left to enroll in Selkirk College's two-year forestry technology program. After graduation, Brash continued with the Forest

Service. He enjoyed the work: “There was all the outdoors, the challenges of the job, and the esprit de corps within the Forest Service.” He got contract after contract but couldn’t get on full-time so after two years switched to private industry and took a job with Kootenay Forest Products. That lasted two years until the company went under, taking Brash’s job with it.

The general economy was sluggish and Brash assumed it would take considerable time to land a new position, so he enrolled in a correspondence program to become a registered professional forester. Somewhat to his own surprise, Brash also got a full-time job with the Forest Service. “It was a very busy time in my life between schoolwork, my first child, and a full-time job.” Like his father before him, Brash lived in a string of forestry communities, including Campbell River, Golden, Port McNeill, Dawson Creek, Haida Gwaii, and Chilliwack.

One year after leaving Haida Gwaii, Dave Husby, then owner of Husby Forest Products in Haida Gwaii, offered Brash a job, which he couldn’t resist (after two weeks of reflection). It was a total role reversal. “Before I was the guy approving harvests, and now I’m the guy asking for permission.” He enjoyed meeting the challenges that come with private industry. “In private industry, it’s a lot more dynamic and there’s a lot more freedom,” Brash says. “In business, you control your own destiny to a larger extent.”

While working at Husby, Brash once again went back to school, this time to earn an executive Master of Business Administration from Queen’s University. While at Husby, Brash’s time was split between Haida Gwaii and his acreage home in Langley where he lives with his wife Natasha, a horse trainer. Between them, they have five children.

After a decade with Husby, Brash left for another challenge; starting a forest company from the ground up for the Haida Nation in Haida Gwaii. Before Taan Forest was created, the Haida didn’t own a forest company. “On my first business card for those folks, the address for my office was my kitchen table, working from a double-wide trailer,” Brash says. Brash led negotiations for completing the purchase of a forest tenure and put a management team in place. It was exciting, interesting work, he says. “But more importantly, when you’re in Haida

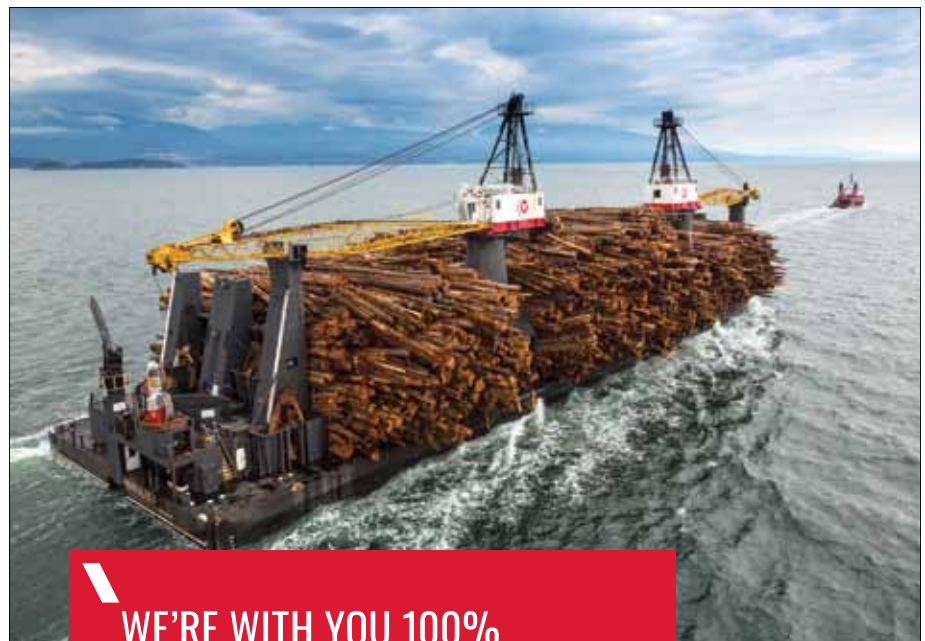
Gwaii the desire to make good for the local Haida Nation can’t help but rub off on you.” Brash was happy to help the Haida reap benefits from their resources which they hadn’t collected on in the past.

Richard Jones, in his previous role as general manager of Taan Forest and member of the Ts’aahl clan, joined Taan in 2011 as contract supervisor. Brash was president at the time and Jones says he appreciated his boss’s efforts to get the company up and running. HaiCo was formed to boost economic development and job creation in Haida Gwaii in a way that separated business interests from local politics, Jones says. Brash was adept at navigating both. “The politics within the Haida Nation is always a funny thing to try to understand and grasp and Bob always did a really good job,” says Jones. “Brash’s strong knowledge base and forest industry experience will give him huge credibility when representing the TLA.”

Brash is a past TLA director and understands the organization well. As executive director his role will now be to advocate for and protect the interests of contractors against a backdrop of competing interests. When it comes

to the balance between economic interests, environmental and cultural considerations and climate change, everyone wants a say in how BC’s forests are managed, he says. “I don’t see that diminishing in any way in the future.”

Kunin believes Brash’s thoughtful approach will help the TLA. “He will not go off the deep end and make rash decisions that people sometimes make under stressful circumstances.” Jones agrees. Market shifts often broadside the forest industry and when they hit Taan, Brash was a calming influence. “He’s seen these ups and downs and we were able to draw on his knowledge of past fluctuations,” Jones says. “He was always able to keep the troops calm and walking in a straight line.”▲



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