

DELAY IN TREE PLANTING SEASON— ARE OUR FORESTS AT RISK?

By Jim Girvan

Although the coastal tree planting season started in February, when the news of the COVID-19 pandemic hit the airwaves, its impacts on the BC Interior tree planting season had yet to be fully embraced.

The 2019 planting season was typical of those in the past, which saw about 275 million trees planted. But beyond the licensee obligations to plant trees after harvest, several issues and opportunities caused the 2020 planting season to be one of the biggest on record with an estimated 310 million trees in the queue to be planted across BC. An increase in trees came from Forests for Tomorrow, a BC government funded program to increase the timber supply; the BC government funded Forest Carbon Initiative; reforestation of recent wildfire areas; replacing of plantations lost to drought; and reforestation of severely impacted mountain pine beetle areas.

During 2018 and 2019, government, industry, and the Western Forestry Contractors' Association (WFCA) worked diligently to ensure that there was enough nursery capacity to meet seedling targets for 2020 as the demand grew.

Things were looking good, until the letter issued on March 24 by BC's Chief Forester, Diane Nicholls stated, "The COVID-19

pandemic is creating huge uncertainty for everyone involved in making the Interior planting...season a success... As Chief Forester for the Province of BC and with the support of BCTS and the WFCA, I am recommending that any planting not yet initiated, be deferred until the beginning of May to provide additional time to allow the preparation of a proper response to...the COVID-19 pandemic...This deferral will allow companies and contractors to develop a proper response to all the factors that need to be considered..."

The tree planting season can see up to 5,000 tree planters from across Canada arrive in rural communities throughout the BC Interior, and planning was needed to protect both workers and residents. Many communities had already voiced concerns about "outsiders" coming into their towns and potentially bringing COVID-19 with them, but given that the Provincial Health Officer designated forestry and silviculture as essential services, the designation legitimized the sector's work during the pandemic. It is, in effect, a mandate from government for contractors to operationalize the public's important investments in our forests.

Gerry Thiessen, mayor of Vanderhoof is sensitive to the issue of tree planters

coming into town. "We can't just say yes come to our town and we can't just say no. We need a solution that will keep the community safe and at the same time address the need to get trees in the ground. But we can't be put in a situation where we decide, are we going to plant a tree or save a life?"

Rural BC communities have done well when addressing the virus given their populations are relatively dispersed and people recognize the need for caution. But missing a single year of planting will make it difficult to ever catch up given the number of trees planned for 2020. Sustainability of the forests in the region may be at risk.

However, from Thiessen's perspective, tree planting contractors with the support of the WFCA have embraced innovation over the years and continue to do so with COVID-19.

While the season was delayed, the pause was used by contractors and clients to equip and implement the new extra measures required to keep crews and communities safe from spreading the virus.

That work was led by a strategic consortium comprised of the Office of the Chief Forester, WFCA, and licensee representatives. Contractor task teams along with



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safety advocates worked on the details. The hold on the season allowed stakeholders to watch where the pandemic was headed and plan appropriately.

There were three key areas of concern that needed to be addressed: The need for approval from the Public Health Office (PHO) to actually start planting trees; a social licence from the rural communities of BC to have planters come into their communities and of course, an agreement on just who will pay the cost experienced by contractors in accommodating COVID-19 concerns.

The first step was the development of the practice document, COVID-19 Pandemic Draft Guidelines for Motels and Remote Accommodations, a general synopsis of information and recommendations developed by Dr. Jordan Tesluk of the BC SAFE Forestry Program's Forestry Safety Advocate. The document provided guidelines for staff screening, transportation of workers, remote site isolation protocols, accommodation requirements and, of course, social distancing while planting.

This plan allowed Thiessen, who also acts as the chair of the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako, to have all other regional mayors agree to work with WFCA as a leap of faith to find solutions necessary to keep everyone safe. "Contractors have agreed to isolate workers where needed, their transportation is structured, and needed camp

supplies will be ordered in advance so that local businesses can continue to support them. Things may have to be adapted, but they will be addressed as we go," says Thiessen.

With a plan in place, can all the trees get planted?

In a March 26 interview with CBC Radio, John Betts, executive director of WFCA, said meeting targets with a shortened season would be tough. "It's remotely possible...if the season's weather cooperates and we end up pushing the season into July, but I think a few million seedlings are at risk."

Mike Trepanier of Industrial Forestry Service Ltd. (IFS) in Prince George oversees their tree nursery that produces about 20 million trees annually. "There is no question that tree planting contractors are in a difficult spot," notes Trepanier.

As a result of COVID-19, IFS implemented many internal measures to secure employee safety. But for IFS, the 75,000 boxes of seedlings (or about 24 million trees) currently being held in cold storage for the spring plant are at risk. They normally start shipping late April with a target planting completion date of June 21. Most shipments are now delayed into early May. If further delays happen, or if all the shipping requests come at once, it will be difficult to thaw and ship simultaneously while keeping employees safe.

Trees in cold storage cannot be held for a later plant as they continue to consume carbohydrates while dormant and eventually, they die. That, and most cold storage units are not designed to hold trees in the warmer summer months. In the end, the tree planting contractor's ability to address issues and meet demand will dictate the nursery's ability to ship.

Additionally, since January, IFS has invested over a million dollars in a crop that is to be planted in the summer of 2020 and they must keep it growing until summer planting starts. "If the spring plant gets delayed further or if planting capacity does not materialize due to COVID-19, then the summer plant may also be at risk," cautions Trepanier.

Rob Miller of PRT Growing Services Ltd. agrees and notes that the delay may jeopardize getting all the trees that are ready for 2020 in the ground. If the planting delay is too long, the nurseries may have no choice but to compost trees.

Ultimately the licensees who have invested in growing the trees have to decide the likely course of action based on the situation that unfolds. Everyone wants to get the trees in the ground, but there are limits to what can be done as the warmer summer weather approaches. That said, licensees still have the liability to reforest and they have already made the financial investment in this year's trees.

Can we catch up if some trees do not get planted? "Not likely in one year," suggests Miller. On the other hand, reduced harvests in 2019 and so far in 2020 and the need to reforest less area harvested in those years may provide needed room to catch up on planting over the next few years. Every year the industry has to re-adjust and make new plans.

Loggers will agree that changes to the circumstances surrounding operations after bids have been made and accepted inevitably causes problems and can cost money, and tree planting contractors are no different. Most planting contracts are negotiated during the winter and spring, but given that the PHO did not approve the order related to industrial camps until April 23, which included tree planting camps, a lot of changes had to be made before the contractors could commence work.

The PHO *Industrial Camps Order* and related guidance document, *Protecting Employees, Contractors, and Employers*

Working in the Silviculture Sector During the COVID-19 Pandemic, details what employers, camp coordinators and workers are required to do in industrial camps. It covers everything from having sanitation stations at worksites, clean vehicles to transport staff from housing to work locations, physical distancing on the job and best practices for handling tools and equipment. It also stresses the importance of workers taking physical distancing steps when accessing the local community to purchase goods and access services. Infection Prevention and Control Plans must be developed and reviewed by the ministry. Ministry staff will visit camps to ensure plans are being followed. Should a violation of the PHO order or adherence of the guidelines be observed, a health official will be assigned to enforce the order.

Jim Logan of Folklore Contracting Ltd. in Prince George and veteran of the tree planting industry sees 2020 as the most challenging he has ever experienced. “We have invested a lot of money in order to make this year’s season happen. If we stop, we are broke, but if we go ahead, we might go broke because of the risk. It is a tough situation.”

The biggest risk to a contractor is if a camp has a COVID-19 outbreak. “If workers get any symptoms, they have to be quarantined, whereas in any other year, symptomatic workers normally will work anyway,” notes Logan. In these cases, man-day rates would have to be paid to those quarantined. With too many symptomatic workers, it could bankrupt a contractor quickly. But, notes Logan, “if we practice what we have put in place, [requiring workers to have health logs and record temperatures, manage the crews working in “pods” of trucks, no buffet meals, separate quarantine areas, and specifically following the PHO order], we should be OK.”

Gaining the social licence to take big crews to small remote communities was another significant challenge for planting contractors. On April 24, a government press release reassured communities that all reasonable steps were being taken to ensure worker and community safety while allowing tree planting to proceed. “BC continues to be a leader in the fight against COVID-19, and now is the time to reinforce our efforts to keep people safe and healthy,” said Doug Donaldson, Minister of Forests, Lands,

Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development. “Tree planting is crucial to the health of our forests, and we are instituting strict measures based on the PHO’s expert direction to make sure that it is done in a way that protects workers and the people of British Columbia.”

“Recent planting completed on the Coast shows that when workers and contractors take appropriate steps to make sure health and safety measures are followed, tree planting can safely take place,” said John Betts. “Our members began implementing additional steps to protect workers and the public very early on, and it is working.”

As for the increased costs that will be realized by contractors to ensure worker and community safety, government, licensees and contractors will all have to share the increased costs and for the most part, new planting contracts are being signed with the new guidelines being addressed. But in the event of a significant COVID-19 outbreak, as Logan points out, “the contractors may still be at risk.”


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Dave Wheeldon, B.Sc.Ed, M.A.Ed
Investment Advisor
250 703-5382
dave.wheeldon@cibc.ca

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