



FORESTRY AS AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE

By Ian MacNeill

At the end of March when the pandemic alarm bells started ringing and workers were starting to get sent home for quarantine, the provincial government hurriedly drew up a list of “essential” services and industries. Services and industries that were deemed essential to “preserving life, health, public safety and basic societal functioning,” basically the kinds of things British Columbians come to rely on in their daily lives. They included forestry-related activities, which came as good news to Bill Nelson of Holbrook Dyson Logging on Vancouver Island.

“We need to go to work,” said Nelson, who is also currently president of the Truck Loggers Association. “After an eight-month strike, we couldn’t afford

to not be working.” He adds that for the most part he and other contractors are not interested in “handouts from government” that many of them might have to pay back anyway because of the size and scope of their operations.

Still, it is anything but business as usual, along with all the costs and inconveniences associated with “social distancing” at work, contractors are facing supply-chain issues as well as a variety of unique challenges. There are minor irritants, such as ensuring that everyone who might need the use of a pen carries their own, to big ones. For example, when the first wave of panic hit, there were concerns that helicopter evacuation services would not be available. This is obviously problematic in remote locations where your team needs

assurances that if one of them gets injured no effort will be spared in getting them timely access to appropriate medical care, and there’s no substitute for a heli-vac. In time, protocols were established for evacuation procedures and Nelson is now expecting the choppers to arrive when and if they are needed.

Added costs of adapting to this new normal are quite obviously having an impact on the bottom line. Transportation has been a real bugbear. Where in the past a crummy or pick-up might have had three to five individuals travelling in it, it is now down to one or two. That means more trucks, more fuel, and more difficulties in finding space for them all at busy worksites.

Fortunately, isolated logging camps are a good thing in the pandemic environment. Employees coming in to get their temperatures tested and are then grilled about their recent travel and domestic activities, and if deemed clean, enter a community where everyone is presumed to be safe. However, town-based employees present a different problem. Pretty much everyone in the forest is safely social distanced while on the job, but you never know what kind of contacts your people are going to have when they go home at night, so you have to have strict protocols on-site and ensure they're respected. The good news is that employees have been good about buying-in to the new world order.

Supply chain issues have also been a problem. Instead of going to suppliers with a truck, loading up and driving away, all ordering has to be done in advance, with consultations taking place over the phone, or online; fortunately, modern technology makes this a lot easier. Also, some town-based suppliers have lost employees to quarantine and are working with reduced staff. "What used to take a day to get now takes two or three," says Nelson.

There is also anxiety about the future. All these new protocols are adding costs, costs that can only be vaguely estimated now, and Nelson says he and other contractors he has spoken to are concerned these costs could put them out of business. However, there is hope that the provincial government will balance cost with need and find a middle ground everyone can live with. Time will tell.

On other fronts, forestry-related activities are not just providing jobs and keeping the economy from collapsing, they are providing essential materials in the fight against COVID-19. Paul Sadler is general manager and CEO of Harmac Pacific, a Northern Bleached Softwood Kraft (NBSK) pulp mill near Nanaimo. Although it only represents about 5 per cent of the company's annual output, Harmac produces a spun-cedar lace product that is used to make protective clothing needed by the medical community. He describes the finished fabric as similar in function to Gore-Tex; it is tough, breathable, comfortable to wear, and most importantly, it stops liquids. "Demand is definitely up," he says, because in addition to higher usage rates, buyers are stocking up for uncertain futures.



In addition to helping in the fight against the disease, this unique and important product also underscores how important it is to maintain some degree of industry access to old-growth cedar, which is essential to the process. "We've been very careful to protect our cedar supply chain," he says. "We've worked very hard to be a good customer."

So far, Harmac has not experienced supply chain issues. However, with the general downturn in the economy and the expected downturn of housing starts in the United States, there is concern about the future. There were fibre-access issues pre-COVID-19, and fears now that they might worsen later in the summer. He and others in the pulp industry are doing everything they can "to alert our colleagues in Victoria that we need help finding solutions to sourcing affordable fibre."

There is another forestry-related product that has been thrust into the limelight thanks to COVID-19, toilet paper. Thanks to a combination of greed on the part of would-be entrepreneurs stocking up in the hopes of gouging their neighbours with inflated prices, as well as fear on the part of many consumers that they would simply run out, toilet paper disappeared from store shelves in the early days of the pandemic. It did not help that videos were popping up on the internet of people fighting in shopping aisles over dwindling supplies.

As a result, it didn't take long for the media to show up at the doors of Kruger Products, located on the banks of the Fraser River in New Westminster, and the producer of 40 per cent of all the toilet paper sold in Western Canada. When the cameras got turned

on, General Manager Mark Evans' words and demeanor conveyed a central message: "Relax, there is going to be lots of toilet paper." And there was. The company rapidly instituted social distancing measures and put the pedal to the metal, and the great toilet paper fiasco of 2020 ended with a whimper. Although the company is limited in its ability to increase output, which this year will hit an estimated 60,000 metric tonnes, it did make changes in order to get the product out the door and on the shelves faster. They included reducing the product line to five or six "flavours" until the pipeline was re-established. Distributors and retailers were fine with that; they just wanted product on the shelves.

Although it operates more in the consumer-products space, Kruger is inextricably linked to forestry, says Evans. It needs a steady stream of both soft and hardwood Kraft to spin out the rolls. Like Harmac, Kruger has not experienced supply chain issues in terms of fibre, so far. There are some concerns about future fibre access because of the recent spate of sawmill closures, but the company's suppliers know that it produces a product that is important to consumers. "There are no guarantees ever," says Evans. "But they'll do everything they can to keep us in fibre." The company also benefits from having access to a large inventory within a radius of 25 kilometres.

Large and small, remote and urban, the current pandemic is underlining the importance of forestry to individuals and communities alike. It is, and will remain for many years to come, an essential industry in British Columbia.▲

The Kiwi Conundrum

It is possible that future forestry classes at schools for young people entering the industry will include a discussion of how quickly interrupting forestry operations can interrupt a supply chain and affect a wide range of industries and consumers alike. Of course, on one level you can hardly blame the government of New Zealand for slamming the economy shut when COVID-19 hit the Land of the Long White Cloud. Who knew how bad it was going to get? Like other countries, it drew up a list of essential services and industries, and forestry was not among them. There were almost immediate repercussions, says Tyson Lambert of T-Mar Industries on Vancouver Island, which designs and manufactures steep-slope logging equipment, about half of which is sold into New

Zealand, so Lambert is familiar with the Kiwi forest economy.

About a third of New Zealand's export economy revolves around one product, radiata pine, which is grown plantation-style, and when the shut-down hit, exports ground to a halt. Buyers in China, who typically absorb as much as half of the export crop, hit the panic button. In addition to its own ports being shut down because of the disease, it could not turn to the United States for alternatives because of the ongoing trade war. "So, you have all these ships full of logs floating around with nowhere to go," says Lambert.

Eventually Chinese ports reopened, and the logs that had been piled up at ports like Tauranga on The Bay of Plenty started flying off the dock and into the steady stream of ships coming to haul them away. However, there were no logs

in the pipeline to replenish them because of the cessation of forestry operations upstream. When *Truck LoggerBC* magazine spoke to Lambert in mid-April he reported that forest companies in New Zealand were "pleading" for a reopening of the industry so they could replenish the depleted docks. "Impatience is starting to set in," he says.

The industry finally reopened April 28, but by then a significant amount of downstream damage had already been done.

COVID-19 has made life difficult, expensive, and often problematic for those operating in the forestry sector in BC, but as the example of New Zealand illustrates, it could have been worse if the industry had not been deemed essential.



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