

## FORESTRY AS AN ECONOMIC SOLUTION



Well, it's certainly been interesting times, as the proverb goes. Over these past several months, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted us all in many different ways. I hope you all have been able to stay safe and healthy.

Some northwest loggers and road builders have been able to continue operations, others have not been so lucky. But, where contractors have a market and control of their costs, they generally have been able to operate, even during COVID-19 because fallers, machine operators and truck drivers are naturally "distanced." It's pretty clear to me that keeping the contractor workforce going during COVID-19 was good for communities and the province.

Just before COVID-19 happened, the BC government started a cost driver process to address the growing economic crisis in the forest industry. Our members were told "everything is on the table." There was good interest and momentum seemed to be building. However, since the pandemic, it feels like we have lost focus. We need to get back to moving on the cost drivers, especially considering how important economic activity is going to be after the lockdown.

One of the good things that has resulted from COVID-19 is that we have seen that when government wants something to happen, they can actually make it happen. The decision to take action on this health crisis was simple. As soon as that decision was made, the speed and cooperation and support that occurred between our leaders and within and across government departments was inspiring. It also proved that many of the concerns or obstacles raised by bureaucracies, whether government or corporate, are not true barriers—instead, they are perceptions and inertia. So, if keeping forest communities and the economy viable in BC is truly important to our leaders, we

now know the decision to address the rural crisis, and to take action to make it happen, can be just as simple.

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I mention forest communities because while the COVID-19 pandemic is global, our well-being and social survival is local. It's within our communities that our spirit and generosity show through, with friends and neighbours helping out when the chips are down. The fact that we can't easily gather together shows how much we need to gather, and the places where we need to do that, such as the ball diamond, soccer pitch, coffee shop, in a store, or on the street in the downtown core. Without those places, we lose our sense of community and our sense of ourselves. Our contractors and the small businesses they support are critical to the make-up of our communities, and COVID-19 has shown how fragile our small businesses can be. The struggles of local stores and restaurants, and the personal or financial devastation from the loss of months' worth of income is becoming a story that is too-often repeated. In BC, we need to leverage what we already have—our forests. This is an industry that is, as stated earlier, naturally distanced, so it's almost COVID-19 resistant. Road builders and loggers provide good employment and those workers live, and will spend their money, within the community.

A few local sawmills in our region have been able to keep running (at least at time of writing). Kudos to them as they work hard to turn logs into saleable and profitable products; they too will benefit if we are able to address cost drivers and contractor sustainability.

So, we need our leaders to look at our forests and forestry contractors as part of the solution to address the economic

and community devastation of the pandemic. Support contractor sustainability, implement the actions from the cost driver process, increase utilization from the forests, and support products that make use of the forest profile.

Our members will also do their part; they will provide good, safe jobs, invest in their equipment, constantly look to innovate so that they can be more efficient, and they will support local businesses.

If we do that, then our province, our people, and the communities where we all work and live, will prosper.

On a final note, I'd like to welcome John Nester, the NWLA's new general manager. He's not new to the organization though, having been involved for many years as a director as well as a past-president. His experience as an owner of a trucking company, and in financial advice and investments, means he is well suited to advocate for our membership and contractor sustainability. Watch for his messages here in future issues.▲

*Rick Brouwer, RPF, NWLA*

*Tel: 250-638-0337*

*Email: rbrouwer@westlandresources.ca*