

COMMUNITY FORESTS: A GOOD NEWS TENURE STORY

By Ian MacNeill

TTrue fact. Discussions about tenure reform in British Columbia have been going on ever since the first timber licences were granted in 1888. No fewer than four Royal Commissions have been struck over the years to examine the issue, all of them recommending at least some kind of redistribution, but staunch resistance from industry and a succession of industry friendly governments have made change difficult.

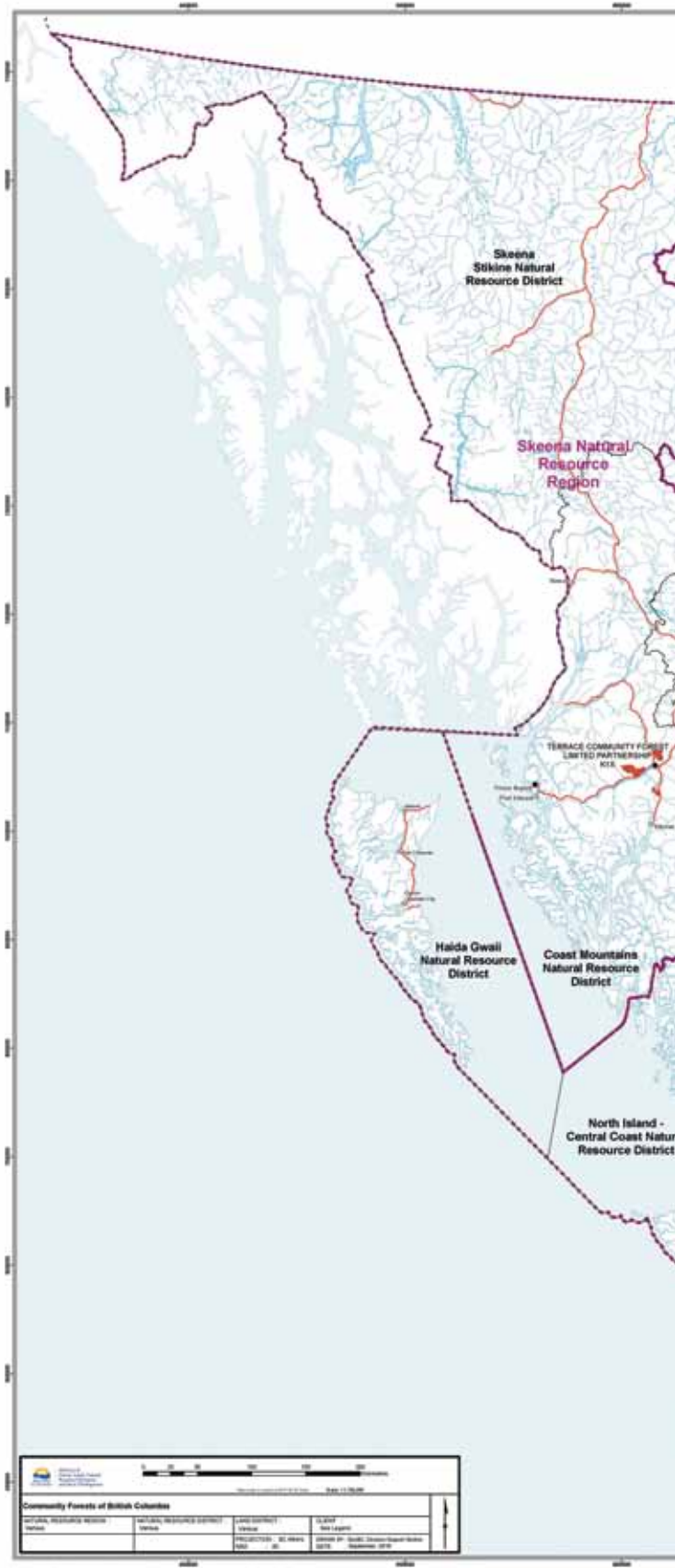
However, there is one kind of tenure reform that is both at work and working in British Columbia. In 1998, influenced by rural communities fearful they would turn into ghost towns after the cut-and-run forest industry had packed up and left for other pickings, the government of Glen Clark (NDP) introduced a new form of tenure—Community Forest Agreements (CFAs). These are area-based licences providing the exclusive right to harvest timber as well as manage botanical forest products. Licences are long-term, 25 years, and replaceable every 10. There are currently 58 CFAs in BC, with another five applications pending. According to the BC Community Forestry Association (BCCFA), these licences are held by a variety of community-based legal entities, including limited partnerships, societies, co-ops, First Nations and local governments. Collectively, more than 100 Indigenous and rural communities are involved in community forestry in BC.

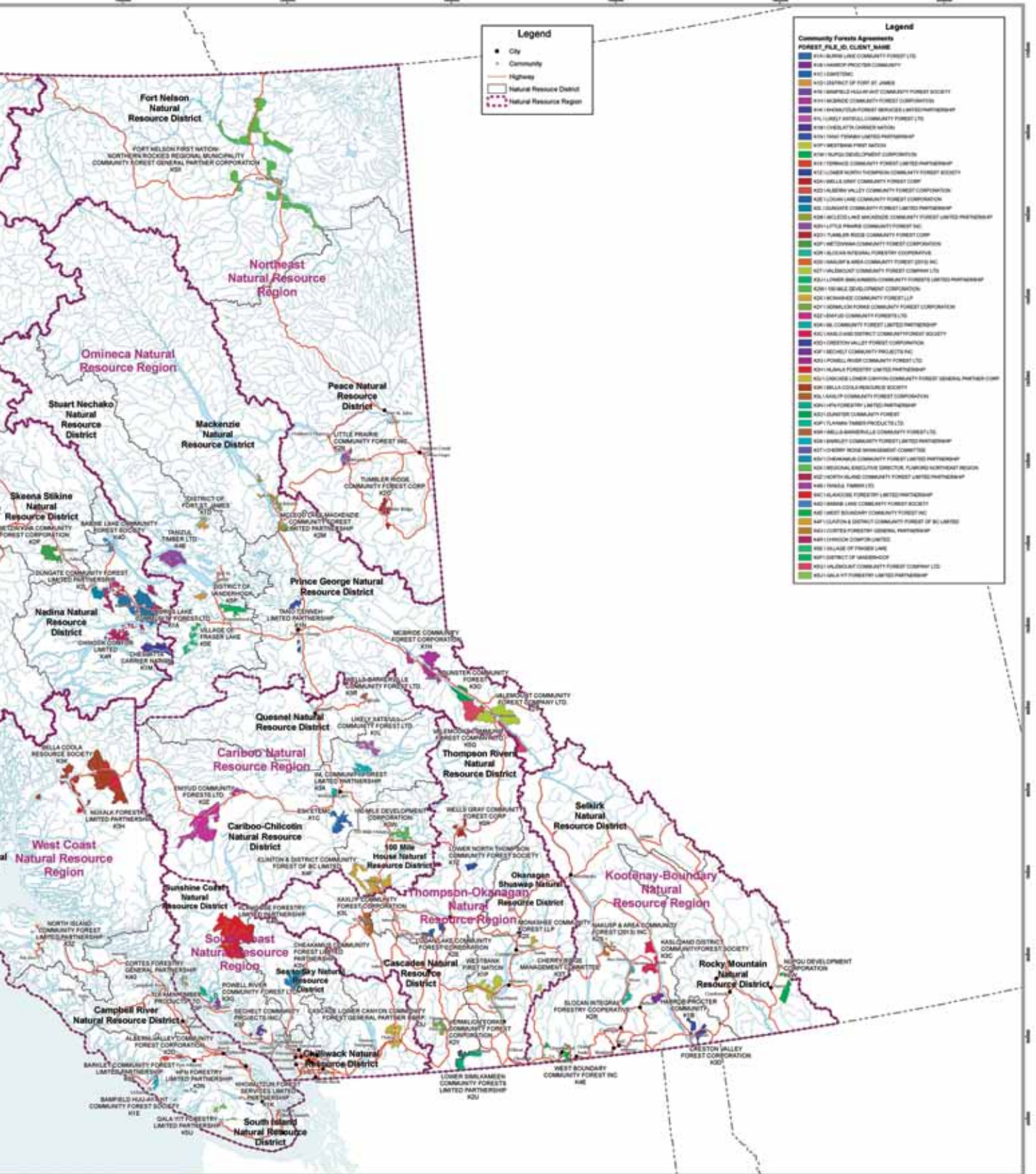
Although CFAs only represent less than 2 per cent of the allowable annual cut (AAC) at 1.9 million cubic metres, they have an outsized influence on the communities they serve. According to the BCCFA's most recent indicators report, community forests are creating 80 per cent more employment in forestry, logging and support services than the industry average. They often operate in sensitive areas and are meeting their cut control while reliably supplying logs to both major processing facilities and small manufacturers. On average, they generated \$1.96 million in economic activity each, and contributed \$527,235 cash and in-kind to local projects. The total funds donated to community projects by the participating community forests in the reporting year alone exceeded \$16.8 million. CFAs also play an important part in wildfire management, with each one spending an average of about \$40,000 to keep the flames at bay.

CFAs are also playing an important role in the reconciliation process. More than half the community forests surveyed in the recent report are held by First Nations or are partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. In many cases, First Nations are engaged in cooperative planning, share profits, have memorandums of understanding and employment contracts, and work with community forest organizations in capacity-building activities like training and education.

In terms of environmental outlook, they are hard to beat. According to the BCCFA, a community with a long-term, area-based tenure is motivated to manage for ecosystem resilience and to invest for the future. For these kinds of reasons, CFA holders typically consider a range of objectives, including enhanced forest stewardship, recreation and the conservation of ecologically and culturally significant areas and values. This year's survey respondents collectively invested \$1.9 million in enhanced forest stewardship above and beyond legal requirements.

Those that have CFAs love them.





“By far, the most important thing for us is that our community forest is an area of land where we get to make the management decisions,” says Dave Gill, general manager of Ntityix Resources, which manages the 46,000-hectare Westbank First Nation Community Forest. The decisions are not just made based on the interest of the Band today. “Like most First Nations, we look forward seven generations. You don’t get that opportunity with a volume-based licence.” In addition, community members can go out on the land, reconnect with it and see for themselves how it’s being managed.

The CFA has also helped the Band create employment for members and build capacity. All the contractors working the land are from the Westbank First Nation, including those engaged in logging, hauling, road building and silviculture. Gill says that before the CFA was granted, Band members who wanted to go logging had to leave town. “It really helps when you can come home every night and help raise your family,” he says.

Gill adds that in the long term, the community would like to see its management practices pushed beyond its CFA

boundaries and into tenures owned by others, including major licensees. This may not be as unlikely as it sounds. In *Smart Future: A Path Forward for BC’s Forest Products Industry*, the Council of Forest Industries (COFI) endorsed strengthening ties between the industry and both communities and Indigenous peoples. Specifically, it suggested increasing “community forest agreements and First Nations woodlands licences in areas directly adjacent to communities to allow for greater local management, protect communities from wildfires, and provide fibre to local manufacturers.”

Problematically for some aspiring communities, there is a rigorous set of criteria for obtaining a CFA and interested entities do not always have the internal capacity to navigate the process. To address that shortfall, the BCCFA serves as a first point of contact, having at its disposal a wealth of information and contacts; its annual conference invariably attracts community representatives interested in rubbing shoulders with potential knowledge sources and partners. The BCCFA can also, on a fee-for-service basis, provide direct support.

There are private consulting firms that can help as well, and even manage the CFA on behalf of the community. In 2014, the 16,700-hectare Logan Lake Community Forest Corporation turned to Forsite Consultants Ltd., a provider of integrated forest land development and management services. “Forsite has been instrumental in turning our Logan Lake Community Forest Corporation into the successful business it is today,” says corporation President Claire Newman on Forsite’s website.

The community of Logan Lake has benefitted both socially and economically from having a CFA says Garnet Mirerau, RPF, a Forsite manager working on the Logan Lake project. “I think one of the big ones is the way in which it has deepened relationships with First Nations,” he says. It’s complicated, because there are a number of First Nations involved, but providing them opportunities to share in management decisions has led to “better conversations.”

Then there are the obvious financial returns. Each year Logan Lake Community Forest does a transfer of profits to the community that are then invested in civic projects. In the past five years, that has amounted to as much as \$3 million,

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which has been used to fund civic upgrades and provide support to as many as 40 community groups. In 2018, the \$1.6 million transfer was used to leverage both provincial and federal funding. One key initiative is a collaborative program through the community forest, Logan Lake Wellness, Health and Youth Society (WHY) and the District of Logan Lake that hires high schoolers to participate in its FireSmart program, which provides them with employment, as well as teaching them the benefits of forestry to their community.

CFAs can also contribute to economic diversification. The 33,018-hectare Cheakamus Community Forest surrounding Whistler, which includes participation between the Lílwat and Squamish First Nations as well as the Resort Municipality of Whistler, has a forest fuel reduction project that in 2018 delivered nearly 3000 metric tons of post-harvesting biomass to a municipal composter where it was mixed with solid waste from sewage and composted into a Class A soil amendment for sale locally.

According to Gord Chipman, manager of the Esketemc First Nation Community Forest at Alkali Lake in the central Interior, the nation's 30,000-hectare CFA provides 12 full-time and 70 seasonal jobs for community members and has a payroll of \$2 million. In the past 10 years, nine community members have been encouraged to pursue and complete degrees or diplomas in resource management.

And the future looks bright. "We have strategic relationships with Pinnacle Pellet with our biomass program and are just entering into a long-term relationship to develop timber with Tolko Industries on the traditional territory with their forest licences," he says.

Considering the tangible and intangible benefits of CFAs to communities and First Nations, it would be surprising if there wasn't a long list of communities that would like to have one. As it happens, many have either tried, or would like to, but have been turned down, or realize it's futile, for one thus-far insurmountable problem.


It comes down to competing interests on the land base, says BCCFA Executive Director Jennifer Gunter. "The allowable annual cut is fully subscribed," she explains. "A strategic shift in government policy and reapportionment of AAC is key to achieving this pragmatic

and important vision of increased community-based forest management."

This is where it gets political. The good news is that industry, as evidenced by the COFI declaration, is supportive, at least on some level. How that will translate into land and tenure transfers remains to be seen, but it is unlikely that current tenure holders would cede tenure assets without some form of financial compensation, at least voluntarily.

Either way, the BCCFA intends to press on providing support and lobbying for policies that will support existing and potential CFA aspirants. "The BCCFA

has recommended that the provincial government consider a reapportionment of volume to community-based tenures that meet the objectives of the provincial government, as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities," says Gunter. The association would also like to see community-based tenures (community forest agreements and First Nations woodlands licences) prioritized in the 10-km zone surrounding Indigenous and rural communities. "This is a critical zone for community wildfire protection and climate change adaptation," she says. "The 10-km zone also includes areas where




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critical social values, ecosystem services and economic opportunities intersect.”

It makes a lot of sense to continue growing CFAs, but that’s not going to

happen until an increasing number of British Columbians are educated to understand the value of community forests and are then willing to articulate their

support at both the local level and the ballot box.▲

Cowichan Community Forest: A Not-So-Good News Story

It’s not exactly another “War in the Woods”, but there’s definitely some scuffling going on when it comes to planning the future of the North Cowichan Municipal Forest Reserve.

Dating from 1946, the 5,000-hectare parcel is unique in that it is located on fee-simple land owned by the community. It was left largely unmanaged until the 1960s when a consulting forester was hired to come up with a plan, which called for diameter-limit cutting by “local” operators. This was updated in the 1980s with a new management strategy that replaced diameter-cutting methods with practices that are still in use today.

From the beginning of the modern era, the forest has been managed on a sustainable basis with multiple users in mind. The original mission statement made that clear, calling for maintaining and enhancing “North Cowichan’s valuable municipal forest resources for all users through sustainable forestry, ecological stewardship, and sound fiscal management.”

“It’s probably been one of the best-managed forests in the country,” says Sig Kemmler, a TLA board member and co-owner of Integrated Operations Group Inc. (IOGI), which had a contract last year to harvest blowdowns

from a winter windstorm. Areas to be harvested in the reserve are carefully selected using a wide-ranging and comprehensive set of criteria; environmental, cultural, recreational, and social issues are all taken into consideration.

In addition to providing valuable revenues to the municipality—as much as \$3 million annually—forestry operations provide employment at wages that far exceed those typically available to unskilled or semi-skilled labourers.

Nevertheless, despite the economic benefits and the efforts that have gone into managing the forest on a sustainable basis, groups and individuals opposed to logging in any form have managed to throw a wrench in the works. Protesters have shown up at council meetings, and on one occasion, tried to block IOGI from going about its business. (The RCMP was called, cooler heads prevailed.)

Clearly rattled, the municipal council suspended “normal” forestry operations indefinitely pending a review from the University of British Columbia. More recently, it put a 60-day hold on a public engagement process that was supposed to gather community input on the future of the reserve.

Will that future include forestry operations? At this stage it’s hard to tell, but Kemmler says that curtailing them altogether would be a blow to a community

where many residents have been hard hit by the COVID-19-induced financial headwinds.

A big part of the problem is that those opposed to forestry operations have seized the initiative, he says. They have made good use of social media platforms and have the time and inclination to organize and attend public events. “People need to understand the other side of it,” says Kemmler. “They need to understand the benefits forestry operations bring to the community. They need a better understanding of the progressive way in which management decisions about the reserve are made and will continue to be made. I’ve been a North Cowichan resident for more than 40 years and I’m proud of what we do. We’re not here to cut and run. What we are essentially doing is tree farming. There are other kinds of farming in the area and no one protests that. And we are doing it in a way that ensures future generations will both profit from and enjoy this remarkable asset. That’s the message we need to get out.”

We’ll keep you posted.

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reduce costs and hope that no new regulatory costs are added to an already dire situation. If stumpage is to remain high and government is not willing or able to consider stumpage reforms to allow fees to be consistently in line with markets as seen in other jurisdictions,

then the focus has to be on the systematic reduction of the other components of delivered log costs. However, this will not be an easy task since globally, BC is already one of the most efficient regions in logging, trucking and sawmilling.

The alternative is to hope that the current good (stellar) markets continue indefinitely or, at least, intermittently. But history has demonstrated that hope is not a good long-term strategy.▲