

INTERIOR FOREST SECTOR RENEWAL

WHAT WE HEARD REPORT:

A TLA REVIEW

By Paul Schuetz

Photo: Kai Jacobson

Recent dramatic changes in the BC Interior's forest industry brought on by the end of the mountain pine beetle epidemic, sawmill closures and tariff pressures from the US resulted in the BC government undertaking the Interior Forest Sector Renewal initiative, which involved a public engagement process to solicit feedback that would help guide decision making on renewed forest policies for the region. Between July to October 2019, feedback was gathered by the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development through an online survey, written submissions and 36 community meetings. In February 2020, government conveyed their findings in its What We Heard report. The following provides a brief synopsis of the report and the TLA's review on issues deemed of potential interest to its members.

To better streamline and focus the flood of incoming data directed toward new forest policies and programs, the public engagement process solicited feedback on the following themes:

- Forest tenure and fibre supply
- Climate change and forest carbon
- Manufacturing capacity and fibre utilization
- Wood products innovation
- Reconciliation with Indigenous communities
- Fibre and sustainability of timber and non-timber forest values

Of these six themes, forest tenure and fibre supply were the most popular with 910 comments recorded, and 41 per cent of participants ranked it the most important policy. Wood products innovation was deemed the least popular, but still

had 236 comments recorded. The following bullets provide a brief summary of the most popular issues and respondents' opinions that were heard for each of the categories, followed by the TLA's review.

Forest tenure and fibre supply

- Redistribute forest tenure. There is "not enough access to tenure and fibre supply for smaller, local operators." Many felt that local communities should have more control over current and new tenure close to home.
- Move from volume-based tenures to area-based tenures. This would encourage long-term investments that would inevitably better protect ecosystems and ensure sustainability of forests.
- Reform the forest tenure model. Keep lumber production of locally harvested timber to nearby community mills and avoid "long haul logging."
- Improve access to affordable fibre. This will generate a "constant and predictable flow of fibre to the industry" to allow for better and longer-term forest planning.
- Reform the stumpage system. Make stumpage prices more responsive to current market conditions to "allow industry to cope with cyclical downturns." Also, by adopting a Cruise Based stumpage system in favour of a scale-based one, respondents felt that there would be greater motivation to increase the utilization of harvested trees.

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- Establish sustainable forest practices. This will ensure biodiversity, moving toward alternate harvesting systems and away from clearcutting, and increase the diversity of trees planted post-harvest.

Reform of the BC forest tenure model and stumpage system were among the most commented-on issues, and many respondents appeared passionate about it being time for province-wide restructuring. Currently, the majority of tenure in BC is held by a small handful of large companies, whose interests (rightly) lie with their shareholders before community well-being. Diversification of tenure ownership would help local communities be less dependent on large corporations.

Improving the utilization of volume harvested in the field will benefit users of residual fibre, such as pulp mills and bioenergy plants, while providing more jobs for logging truck drivers to haul the extra volume. Transitioning to more area-based tenures was viewed favourably by many respondents, as licensees tend to invest more capital into future stands and thereby help ensure timber quality is enhanced for future generations.

Climate change and forest carbon

- Increase efforts for more carbon sequestration. Planting a greater number and more diverse array of tree species and protecting old-growth forests.
- Use incentives to reduce carbon emission. Carbon-based tax exemptions or refunds could be given to companies that reduce carbon emissions and environmental impacts from their daily activities.
- Give more control to local communities over the management of their nearby forests, since these “rural communities are the first affected during climate events.”
- Improve wildfire risk management and prevention. Better utilization and increasing the use of residual fibre, planting more fire-resistant trees, creating effective fire-smart programs around communities and ensuring adequate funding for fire-fighting during dry summers.

Reducing wood waste in the field is a sound strategy to reduce wildfire hazard, while increasing the availability of residual fibre. Planting more trees would also prove to be effective; however, the

question is if the cost-to-benefit ratio of increased planting densities will make this strategy worthwhile.

Manufacturing capacity and fibre utilization

- Encourage greater utilization of residual fibre. Limiting the amount of pile burning in the bush by providing tax credits for the utilization of residual waste or providing waste wood free of charge to local Indigenous communities. Also, making residual waste available for “secondary manufacturers” and creating fibre recovery zones for movement of fibre.
- Promote the development of new products and markets. Government support and incentives for manufacturing value-added products was suggested, including banning some plastic products in favour of paper-based alternatives such as grocery bags and drinking cups.
- Provide incentives for innovation. Government programs and incentives could be directed toward research institutes and the development of new and “innovative ideas for the use of waste.”
- Buy and use BC-made wood. “Banning or restricting raw log exports as a way of enhancing wood manufacturing,” which in turn would provide more jobs and create stability within forestry communities.

As mentioned above, enhanced utilization would partially decrease the demand for residual fibre for non-sawmill users. However, would suggestions, such as whole-tree hauling and logging to a two-inch top tree, be feasible and cost-effective for logging contractors? Incentives may need to be put in place so that sawmills, whose primary focus is the recovery of sawlogs, adjust operations in consideration for other users in a manner that is economically feasible for all parties.

Wood products innovation

- Provide incentives for innovation and investment. Include tax credits, especially for smaller, innovative and start-up companies; and long-term loans and “long-term tenure” that allows for lengthier investment opportunities and enables better planning.

- Develop and diversify markets for BC wood products. Changing building codes to encourage further use of wood products; providing financial aid and incentives for bioenergy firms; and marketing the quality of BC wood to the international market.
- Support investment in research and development of wood technology. Grants could be issued to universities and other institutions to improve technology, product development, etc.

It is imperative for the BC forest industry to remain cutting edge and innovative to stay competitive in world markets. Government grants and tax credits might help in this regard. Wood products innovation also provides an opportunity to improve the industry's image in the eyes of the public, and money in the form of grants might be enough to attract experts into the BC wood innovation field.

Reconciliation with Indigenous communities

- Increase Indigenous participation in the forest industry. Allow Indigenous communities more "decision-making power over how resources are managed," creating

more opportunities and programs in which partnerships can be fostered with forest companies and increasing Indigenous communities' ownership of "forestry assets and businesses," especially in the form of new tenure prospects.

- Support Indigenous education, training and mentorship. Provide opportunities and funding for Indigenous workers to become employed, trained and mentored within the forest industry.

With tenure reform likely awarding Indigenous communities with more forestry management opportunities, it is sensible to forge long-lasting business relationships with First Nations communities. Providing employment, training and mentorship is a win-win situation for anyone working in the forest industry today and will be even more of a factor in the future.

Fibre and sustainability of timber and non-timber forest values

- Support a sustainable approach to forest management. This can be done by preserving ecosystems; supporting the involvement of Indigenous communities in land use planning; improving forest planning techniques by updating

inventory through use of LiDAR; and revaluing "non-timber uses, such as tourism."

Sustainable forest management is the goal of forest planners and having proper tools such as updated inventory and LiDAR helps them do the best job they can. There is room in BC forests for a healthy and sustainable industry to work alongside recreation, tourism, and other resource values. Distinguishing rare and sensitive ecosystems and important wildlife areas is vital to preserving areas that should be protected, instead of classifying them into broad and contentious categories such as old growth. Identifying high productive stands, and then performing intensive silviculture on those sites to maximize volume on minimal areas tends to create more opportunities for other resource users to enjoy BC's forests.

It is important to solicit public input and opinion to incorporate into new policies and programs and government's engagement process has succeeded in acquiring a broad section of public responses. Now, will government engage the *forest sector* before they incorporate what they've heard into upcoming policies and decisions? The entire industry is hoping so.▲

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