

BC'S OLD GROWTH STRATEGIC REVIEW: WHAT IT MEANS FOR CONTRACTORS

By Jim Girvan

The management of old-growth forests in BC has been a contentious issue in this province for decades. Satisfying the public's interest in deriving economic benefits and employment from our forests while also maintaining ecological and cultural values has been challenging.

Today, old-growth harvesting accounts for approximately 50 per cent of the allowable annual cut on Vancouver Island, down from 95 per cent in 1995, and will continue to fall as the industry manages the ongoing transition to second growth. As this has occurred, sawmilling and logging investments

have allowed the industry to retool in a measured way.

In July 2019, BC government announced the Old Growth Strategic Review that involved an appointed independent, two-person panel to undertake public engagement on old growth and provide a report to the minister.

“Through this process, the government intends to provide more clarity about old-growth management and about balancing economic, conservation and cultural values.”

Garry Merkel (professional forester, natural resource expert and member of the Tahltan Nation) and Al Gorley (professional forester and former chair of the Forest Practices Board) engaged the public to hear people’s perspectives on the ecological, economic and cultural importance of old-growth trees and forests.

Merkel and Gorley reported back to government in spring 2020 with recommendations to inform a new approach to old-growth management in British Columbia. On September 11, 2020, government released the report and announced it was embarking on a new, holistic approach to protecting old-growth forests.

As was noted in the Review, “Two different people from two completely different walks of life could value the same old-growth forest for two totally different reasons. In an organized society, this places tremendous responsibility on the government to ensure these values are fairly balanced.” A few specific comments from the “What we Heard” document are

as diverse as the province’s forests and supports this perspective:

- “All remaining old-growth forest should be considered endangered habitat and should receive full protection from all forms of destruction.”
- “Decisive action, in terms of halts on all old growth (logging), has to be a prelude to planning. Otherwise it is just the same old “talk and log” and the same old perspectives on land-use. We do not have time for that.”
- “Crown forests are managed with myriad values in mind, including recreation, soils, sustainable timber supply, wildlife, water, fish, biodiversity, visual landscapes and cultural resources.”

What is old growth?

There is no commonly accepted definition of an old-growth forest. In British Columbia, scientists have developed a working definition that is based on the age of trees, biogeoclimatic zones and the frequency of natural disturbances. Most of BC’s coastal forests are considered old growth if they contain trees that are more than 250 years old. Some types of Interior forests are considered old growth if

they contain trees that are more than 140 years old.

The timber harvesting land base (THLB) comprises 20.3 million hectares, or about 35 per cent of forested areas in BC. Old-growth forests, based on age alone, comprise about 3.6 million hectares or 18 per cent. Every year, just over 200,000 hectares of forested land is harvested. This represents about 1 per cent of the overall THLB.

Of the annual harvest, about 73 per cent comes from non-old-growth stands and about 27 per cent comes from old growth. On BC’s Coast, old-growth forests that are older than 250 years comprise an important part of the forest economy and contribute about 50 per cent of the timber harvesting land base.

Despite environmentalists’ rhetoric, on a province-wide basis, old-growth forests are not disappearing. There are more than 25 million hectares of old-growth forests in BC and about 4.5 million hectares are fully protected. Conserving old growth is also an important part of long-term resource management. By law, forests that reflect the working definition of old growth must be retained in ecological units to meet biodiversity needs.



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On the Coast, of the four million hectares of old-growth forests on Crown land, only 769,000 hectares are available for harvesting. Protected areas on Vancouver Island and the South Coast were identified through consensus land use planning processing that was conducted during the 1990s involving the public, First Nations, environmental groups and communities. In both areas, the percentage of protected areas exceeds the United Nation's recommended target of 12 per cent.

to pressure companies to stop logging in this area altogether.

These statistics, while valid as a framework for engaging the old-growth discussion, are seen to represent only the industry perspective and not one that is shared by the public. Further, defining, quantifying and managing old growth based fundamentally on age alone is not a practice that has garnered support from the public, who turned out in droves to provide perspectives on old growth, old forests and old trees.

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The Great Bear Rainforest, for example, covers 6.4 million hectares; an area twice the size of Belgium, and fully protects 1.8 million hectares from resource development. Of the total area, only 9 per cent is available for logging. However, despite the agreement to protect these forests, environmental groups continue

Based on 18,523 responses, when respondents listed the top three reasons that old-growth forests are important, they said: support for biodiversity 76 per cent; habitat for wildlife and fish 53 per cent; and carbon storage to mitigate climate change 48 per cent. The economic benefits from timber harvesting as a top

three value were only shared by a mere 7 per cent of respondents.

That said, the report did not include any assessment of the economic benefits or the potential trade-offs that would come with increased old-growth preservation. This was despite the 2017 PricewaterhouseCoopers study that demonstrated more than 140,000 jobs are created by the forest industry, or the 2020 COFI study where Susan Yurkovich, president and CEO, noted, "Many people tend to associate the forest industry with rural areas and smaller communities, but this study shows that people working in businesses in urban centres also depend on a strong and vibrant forest industry supply chain."

The report also demonstrated that 89 per cent of respondents felt that the top three greatest risks to old-growth forests were: logging 89 per cent; urban development 54 per cent and other industrial activity 49 per cent. Clearly, the input to the review and its outcomes were heavily stacked against the forest industry. This was further emphasized when most respondents (81 per cent) agreed that naturalist or conservation groups should be actively involved in






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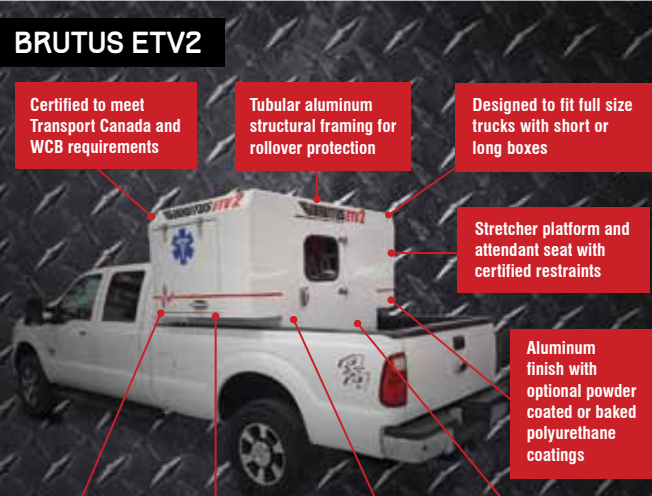
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decision-making about the future of old-growth forests in BC with only 27 per cent suggesting the forest industry should be involved at all.



It's no surprise then when the 14 recommendations for change were fundamentally geared towards the perceived weaknesses in BC's forest management regime, the need for a paradigm shift in the way we approach managing forests and the need for more protection of old growth. This came with virtually no discussion or consideration for the potential economic impacts to workers and communities if more old growth is eliminated from the working forest.

What do the recommendations suggest?

Essentially, they create a roadmap for a change in how we manage forests, with less involvement of forest companies and more involvement of environmental groups, community and First Nations, a much greater focus on maintaining ecological biodiversity in BC's forest and much less emphasis on timber supply and related jobs and economic activity. For years BC's forests have been the backbone of BC's economy, but the report suggests now that, "conservation and




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management of ecosystem health and biodiversity of British Columbia's forests should be an overarching priority".

To achieve this, adoption of a three-zone forest management system is suggested; a governance model that gives local communities and stakeholders a greater role in forest management decisions that affect them, and provision of timely and objective information about forest conditions and trends to the public.

More immediate recommendations included deferral of development in old forests where ecosystems are at very high and near-term risk of irreversible biodiversity loss (which the government has already acted upon), and a process to bring management of old forests into compliance with existing provincial targets and guidelines.

Other recommendations include: establish and fund a more robust monitoring and evaluation system; establish a standardized system and guidance that integrates provincial goals and priorities to local objectives and targets, update the targets for retention and management of old and ancient forests, improve the mapping and classification of old forests to recognize

multiple values and create a silviculture innovation program aimed at developing harvesting alternatives to clearcutting that maintain old-forest values.

All of this was to be achieved within a three-year window with support for forest sector workers and communities as they adapt to changes resulting from a new forest management system.

The final recommendation clearly eluded to the fact that with the implementation of these recommendations, workers and communities would be at risk and in need of government support.

For his part, then Forest Minister Doug Donaldson gave a muted response to the recommendations noting that, "those who are calling for the status quo to remain are risking crucial biodiversity loss, while those who are calling for immediate moratoriums on logging are ignoring the needs of tens of thousands of workers. Our government believes in supporting workers, while addressing the needs of old-growth forests, and these values will guide our new approach."

The Sierra Club's response was as expected, downplaying the initial steps

taken by government to protect 352,739 hectares of old growth when they said, "the province inflated the numbers by including areas that were already protected or that were not at risk of logging."

Likewise, the response from the Endangered Ecosystems Alliance was, "if you look at the facts, it still essentially preserves the core of the old-growth logging industry," said Ken Wu, executive director. "Left as it is, it will liquidate most of the remaining endangered old growth."

Bob Brash, executive director of the Truck Loggers Association noted, "government wants industry to innovate, invest, and create good paying jobs. Unfortunately, that won't happen until we have certainty on the working forest that supports the industry. Government must also enforce such certainty because ENGOs constantly break agreements and trust as evidenced by ongoing and escalating demands for ever-more protection as we speak. Why would anyone want to invest in such a climate?"

Todd Chamberlain, general manager of the ILA knows that old growth in the Interior is not like on the Coast, but he firmly believes that, "government needs to properly educate the public on the true definition of old growth and that it is not just a coastal issue, but a provincial issue." From his perspective, forests have to be managed for all the values, and all stakeholders need to be involved in decision-making. "Old-growth management cannot dominate forest management decisions," says Chamberlain, "government needs to learn from the successes of the past."

With a commitment from government to begin the work to address information gaps, update inventory and improve public access to information, all the while working to involve industry, environmental groups, community-based organizations and local governments in discussions regarding the report's recommendations and the future of old-growth forests in BC, it will be crucial for the logging sector to stay engaged or fear the loss of the natural resource that supports their livelihood.▲

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