

A SKILLED, DIVERSE INDIGENOUS WORKFORCE IS THE KEY TO ADDRESSING “DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN”

By Dr. Charlene Higgins

A new government brings with it a renewed mandate for every ministry “to create opportunities for Indigenous peoples to be full partners in the economy.” In Premier Horgan’s mandate letter to the new Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development Katrine Conroy, one area of focus is on the transition of the forestry sector from a high-volume to high-value production, which includes increasing value-added initiatives to encourage fibre utilization in an era of declining timber supply.

These are not new goals or concepts. In response to the 2008 global economic crisis and its impact on the BC forest industry, the Liberal government established the 2009 Working Roundtable on Forestry “to consider the long-term future of the

forest industry, taking into consideration global changes, and to make recommendations for a vibrant and successful forest industry for future generations.” One of the goals was to move the industry forward by creating higher value from the utilization of forest resources. The 2009 roundtable identified six priorities and 29 recommendations. One of the priorities for achieving the vision of a “vibrant, sustainable, globally competitive forest industry for current and future generations” was that First Nations become full partners in forestry. In March 2009, the Liberal government released the *Generating More Value from Our Forests: A Vision and Action Plan for Further Manufacturing* report, which focused on four key priorities: maximizing the value extracted from our forests, growing trees, expanding

markets, and increasing the use of wood for construction.

There has been a political action plan and vision in place with a focus on “added value over volume” for over a decade, so why are we not further ahead? Our current forest management frameworks are still based on managing for volume first, several mills have shut down, the value-added sector has failed to flourish, and a major barrier to the introduction of new products and processes has been a limited, available and skilled labour pool.

Transition of the forestry sector from high-volume to high-value production that supports value-added and manufacturing initiatives will require access to a highly trained and skilled workforce. What steps can we take to address this potential barrier?



Increased Participation of First Nations in the Workforce: Connecting First Nations Talent to Forestry Sector Opportunities

In 2018, the BC First Nations Forestry Council (BCFNFC) launched the BC First Nations Forestry Workforce Strategy. It was developed collaboratively with First Nations, industry, and the Indigenous Skills, Employment and Training Program (ISETP) delivery organizations as a long-term initiative to increase the participation and success of Indigenous peoples in the BC forestry sector through training, careers, and employment opportunities.

The aim of the workforce strategy is to achieve sustainable and meaningful career, employment, and business outcomes for First Nations peoples in the BC forestry sector through collaborative partnerships among First Nations, forest companies, ISETP, and the Forestry Council, while reflecting community cultural values, the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action.

First Nations can play an important role in the transition of the forestry sector. The workforce strategy outlines the goals, priorities, and actions to:

- Increase First Nations' participation and success in forestry related education, post-secondary training, and industry certification.
- Increase First Nations' awareness of, and interest in, forestry employment, qualifications, and career paths.
- Sustain forestry partnerships and connections focused on Aboriginal forestry and training and employment success.
- Recruit, retain, and advance First Nations in BC forest industry education and training, employment and careers, including job coaching and mentorship.
- Promote and provide support to First Nations for the economic development of their own forest companies and contractors.

The workforce strategy, when fully implemented, provides a path towards the development of an available, and skilled Indigenous workforce.

The Indigenous Forestry Scholarship Program (IFSP): A Forestry Workforce Powered by First Nations

The Indigenous Forestry Scholarship Program (IFSP) is an existing program that the BCFNFC, in partnership with the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development has developed. The program is designed to grow and connect Indigenous

and laddering to gain the skills needed to access highly skilled jobs related to new value-added and manufacturing initiatives associated with a transition of the forestry sector from high-volume to high-value production.

Our relationships with First Nations communities, organizations, and individuals are the foundation and key to the success of the IFSP program and en-

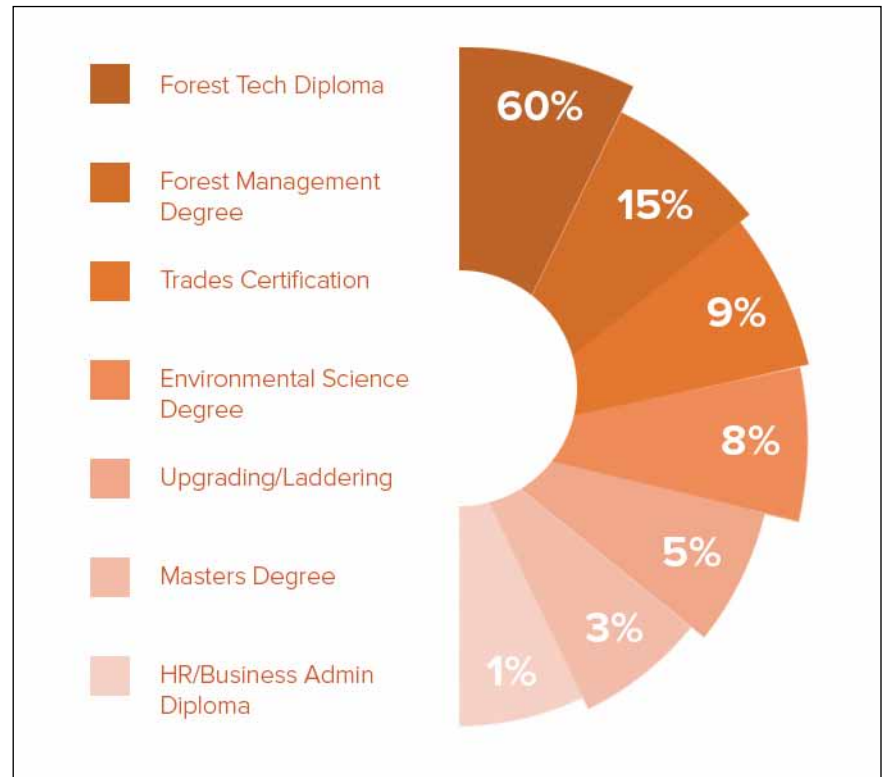


Chart courtesy of BCFNFC

Since the launch of the program in 2012, 80 Indigenous students have participated.

talent to BC forestry sector workforce opportunities. It is a work and study mentorship program that provides the opportunity for Indigenous students to access funding, and enter into forestry related training and educational programs, and includes mentored summer work experience in their field.

The BCFNFC takes a different approach to attracting Indigenous talent to the forestry sector by working directly with First Nations communities, organizations and individuals to promote, recruit, and provide mentorship for the students. Our work includes helping the students find appropriate pathways to work placements they are interested in, and providing continuous support to keep them on track towards their professional development and success. The IFSP also supports retention and advancement by providing opportunities for upgrading

hances our ability to recruit, mentor, and connect students with industry partners. It enables us to assist the student and industry partner in an effort to increase First Nations' success, participation, and the diversity of the workforce.

The IFSP provides an opportunity for major licensees, independent wood producers, and timber harvesting contractors to strengthen and increase partnerships with local Indigenous communities and to develop workforce initiatives that include training and employment opportunities needed to sustain a skilled workforce, especially in rural areas.

Investing in developing First Nations talent is a way to build an available and locally skilled Indigenous workforce.

To get involved in the Indigenous Forestry Scholarship Program, contact Karen Sorensen at workforce@forestrycouncil.ca for partnership opportunities. 🌲