

BURNS LAKE COMMUNITY FOREST

By Robin Brunet

Burns Lake is renowned for its rich First Nations heritage, world-class mountain biking trails, and aquatic recreation opportunities.

It is also a hub for logging and sawmilling, and on that score the village of just over 2,000 residents earned a special place in BC's forestry history in December 1998 by launching the province's first community forest.

Back then, the pilot project encompassed about 23,000 hectares of Crown land. Today, the Burns Lake Community Forest Ltd. (BComFor) is 92,572 hectares in size with an allowable annual cut of 118,100 cubic metres of green timber—and it has the right to salvage an additional 72,951 cubic metres annually of dead wood ravaged by the mountain pine beetle.

The success of BComFor and related logging activities has not gone unnoticed. Last year, the BC Council of Forest Industries ranked Burns Lake as one of the top 15 of 340 communities for industry spending, with \$7 billion worth of goods and services purchased in 2019 from about 9,900 province-based companies and Indigenous suppliers.

But there's a caveat to Burns Lake's prominence in the forestry sector. "Essentially, our community is surrounded by dead pine and other combustible fuels in constrained areas," says Frank Varga,

BComFor's general manager. "Yet policy makers favour landscape heritage values above cleaning out the wood, doing controlled burns, and making us safer."

It's hardly news that Burns Lake is at perpetual risk of being engulfed by wildfires. Over the decades its residents have endured summers of breathing in yellow-tinged smoke, waiting for evacuation orders as blazes inch closer to town, and then hoping in vain for policy change as politicians later tour the destruction from the safety of the air.

In fact, it could be argued that potential immolation has always dogged Burns Lake: it was originally named Burnt Lake by the Boreland Expedition in 1866, during the construction of the Collins Telegraph Line, after a massive forest fire swept through the area and charred the countryside.

Still, locals value their physical surroundings, and Varga is no exception. Trained as a forester, he lived in many communities throughout the province before settling permanently in Burns Lake 15 years ago. "I loved the region and the lakes, and then as now, it was a great place to raise a family," he says. "Plus, it's one of the most inviting communities I've ever known."

Shortly before Varga made Burns Lake his home, BComFor had become the first organization in the province

to be offered a 25-year renewable forest tenure that replaced the original pilot agreement. Since its inception, it has accumulated an impressive roster of achievements, including providing the bulk of its harvested timber to local sawmills (Decker Lake Sawmill cuts sawlogs, while Pacific Timber cuts specialty products); spending over \$60 million on goods and services in the Burns Lake area; donating more than \$10 million to community groups, organizations, partners, and shareholders; and providing economic and educational opportunities for local First Nations peoples, including employment and training in forestry.

Varga says, "Given the fact we have so much dead wood due to the pine beetle—which caused a big restructuring of BComFor five years ago—we're constantly looking for ways to maximize revenue. Four years ago we acquired FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification with an eye to the European market. So, while we have less volume of wood due to the infestation, its value has increased. Plus, we continue to focus our efforts in dead pine fibre utilization as long as the market supports the fibre profile."

Part of BComFor's success is due to its structure. It is one of a handful of corporations governed by a board of directors chosen from the community who



employ a consensus-based approach to decision-making. Under this system, all company directors must agree on a course of action before it is undertaken, and this approach has helped build solid working relationships between the corporation's various partner groups (which include the Wet'suwet'en First Nation, Tsayu Tat'at Bin, Gilseyhu Honeagh Bin, and Laksilyu Tselh K'iz Bin clans, whose traditional territories are within the community forest).

Perhaps BComFor's most famous achievement outside of resource management was its role in clearing land and designing and helping to build the Burns Lake Mountain Biking Association's network of trails within the community forest—which in turn led to the region gaining worldwide recognition as a mountain biking mecca. "Recreational development is one of our designations, and we also support the Lakes Outdoor Recreation Society, which manages two provincial parks and over two dozen forestry recreation sites and trails in the Lakes District," says Varga. "Our work in this regard boosts tourism, and today we're on many Top 10 North American bucket lists for skiing, snowmobiling, and hiking, as well as for mountain biking and hunting and fishing."

In many ways, the success of BComFor as an effective area-based land man-

agement system makes government's continued focus on landscape heritage values all the more frustrating. Burns Lake's vulnerability to wildfires attracted province-wide attention most recently in 2018, when forestry consultant B.A. Blackwell and Associates Ltd. ranked it as among the top five communities at risk in BC based on the percentage of area of hazardous fuels.

Varga was quoted by news media at the time, "We need to recognize that drawing lines on a map and restricting forest management activities within those lines contradict our efforts for protection of property and human life in rural communities, and in a broader context undermine our efforts for true sustainable forest management."

He added that BComFor was well equipped to support management strategies to mitigate fire risks such as prescribed burning, clearcut harvest, and fibre removal, all within a five to ten kilometre range around Burns Lake instead of the standard two kilometre range: "I just need the legislative support to do so. Until there is an appetite to make changes for the purposes of fire hazard mitigation, implementation will be limited."

Varga smiles ruefully as he recalls his plea. "The more things change, the more they stay the same, because I'm arguing

for exactly the same things today," he says. "Sure, the hills around us are pretty, but they're full of dead pine. We need to clear it all out, and then we need to do continued burns. What we're proposing is ecosystem restoration, which should take precedence over visual values."

As municipal leaders in other communities can attest, persistent lobbying efforts and other strategies have earned sympathetic lip service. "We, along with Burns Lake Mayor Dolores Funk, have gained a lot of support from Victoria, but so far it hasn't translated into action," says Varga. "And frankly, as we have this discussion in early 2021, I've exhausted all avenues in trying to get traction. I literally spend every day trying to come up with new ideas that might result in policy changes."

But like other proud Burns Lake residents, Varga has no intention of giving up the fight. "If anyone out there has ideas about what we can do next, I'm all ears. Meanwhile, we'll keep repeating our message about the need to be truly fire smart until someone is willing to work with us to make it happen.

"I just hope a summer of devastating wildfires won't be the catalyst."▲