



## COMMERCIAL THINNING IN THE BC INTERIOR

In August 1961, the Prince George, BC night sky was lit up by the massive 23,000-hectare Grove fire raging on nearby Tabor Mountain and Willow River area. In the aftermath, the local *Prince George Citizen* newspaper described what was left behind as “an awesome, utterly black wasteland”. However, as areas devastated by forest fires typically do, a young forest grew from the ashes and today, the area hosts a vibrant forest of spruce, Douglas fir and pine trees. At 60 years old, portions of the Grove burn that lie within the Willow River Demonstration Forest (aka Woodlot Licence 272) serves as an example of an area on which specialized silviculture in the form of commercial thinning should significantly increase the current and fu-

ture commercial value of the stand. The Willow River thinning project is initiating interest among forest planners in the private and public sectors, and it is hoped that positive results will motivate the BC government to support similar initiatives and invigorate the midterm fibre supply to ensure the commercial value of the forests in the BC Interior are sustained.

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Numerous communities throughout the Interior are surrounded by intermediate-aged stands that have evolved either from timber harvesting or natural disturbances such as wildfire. Like the Grove burn area, many of these intermediate stands have high stem densities and would naturally self thin over the next several decades. However, by applying commercial thinning to these stands, where the demand exists and the economics support the cost, this natural process is sped up and the trees that are left behind benefit from the extra nutrients, water and sunlight made available from

the stand opening up. A consequence of commercial thinning is that the remaining trees will grow larger and more vigorously than they would if no stand tending were applied. Accelerating the growth of the remaining trees will allow a second-pass harvest to occur sooner.

Mike Trepanier, TLA member and manager of the Willow River Demonstration Forest, says their commercial thinning project is similar to activities commonly practised in Scandinavian countries. “There is not a lot of history of commercial thinning in the Interior of BC, and perhaps there is an opportunity to supply jobs and fibre in the short term, and get high quality sawlog yields in the mid- to longer-term, closer to home.” The commercial thinning project in Willow

River is targeting a spruce and Douglas fir stand that Trepanier states is a good site for this type of silviculture treatment. “You have to treat the right stands with the right cutting prescription to obtain the desired outcome.” Other attributes in a preferred natural stand include an age of about 40 to 80 years, 1,500 to 2,500 stems per hectare, well-drained, productive growing sites where the trees have good rooting and are fairly wind-firm. Additionally, focussing on stands that are close to communities and processing facilities decreases the transportation costs for the fibre that is being removed, while providing local work for community members.

Willow River’s commercial thinning is planned to remove about 70m<sup>3</sup>/ha of fibre from the project area, of which about 30 per cent is destined for a sawmill, with the remainder going to a local bioenergy plant. Today, the most significant challenges of commercial thinning in the Interior include:

- The current tenure and appraisal policies are not conducive to the practice of alternative silviculture systems or responsive to their higher costs.
- The need for specialized equipment.
- The requirement for a properly trained workforce who are skilled at identifying the most suitable trees to leave behind for retention.

Willow River’s commercial thinning is currently being conducted by TLA member, Freya Logging, who Trepanier observes as being “conscientious and knowledgeable” in their operations. However, specialized companies such as Freya are not in abundance in the Interior, and with the potential for communities to focus on their own nearby intermediate stands of timber, opportunities exist for contractors to acquire the equipment and training required to conduct commercial thinning on candidate sites. Government- and licensee-supported programs could provide opportunities and initiatives for contractors in nearly every forestry community in the Interior. This would not only create more local employment, but would help to alleviate shortages in the pulp and bioenergy supply chain in the short term, while improving timber supply in the midterm.

During the 2021 Association of BC Forest Professionals conference, Chief Forester Diane Nicholls mentioned commercial thinning as an example of the new forest landscape planning practice that will soon be implemented throughout BC. Perhaps putting those practices to the test in those high density stands next to forestry communities would be a good first step.▲

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