

FOREST HEALTH¹ ISSUE

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The intent of this bulletin on forest health is to inform people concerned about the future of British Columbia's (BC) forest and generate dialogue regarding what we are doing to ensure our forests are productive, healthy and provide the economic, environmental and social benefits we expect from them over the long-term.

ISSUE

Inadequate and inconsistent resourcing of a Provincial forest health program is impacting critical wildlife habitat, current and future timber supply and community diversification opportunities from BC's future forests.

It is a common view that climate change is creating favourable conditions for insect and disease outbreaks throughout the interior of BC. This has a high potential to negatively impact forest productivity, critical wildlife habitat and sensitive ecosystems, generate international trade sanctions and negatively impact short and long-term forest revenue. This is the time to ensure a healthy and productive future forest. The forest asset must be maintained and can be with stable funding and a nominal increase (i.e., \$2.5 million/year) in funding. It does not take a major cost benefit analysis to show the wisdom of taking this action and the potential impact of not!

MFLNRO FOREST HEALTH PROGRAM BUDGET

Other than staff salaries, the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (MFLNRO) forest health funding comes from the Land Based Investment Program (LBIP). This is a fund under the Ministry's budget to assist industry and Government with the cost of forest operations beyond contractual agreements. It is usually over subscribed and the forest health program has to compete with all other activities.

The MFLNRO forest health program budget for the last 5 years has been:

2007/08	\$10.4 million
2008/09	\$8.7 million
2009/10	\$5.5 million
2010/11	\$7.5 million
2011/12	\$8.5 million

¹ Focus on forest pests, specifically insects, disease and invasive species

The expectation is the 2013 budget will be slashed compared to the 2012 allocation even though the common view is the current budget allocation of \$8.5 million is marginal in providing the necessary funds for the basics of the forest health program. Also, the inconsistency of the budget and the low levels suggests more attention has to be given to providing adequate resources to protect the BC forest asset.

Forest health populations can explode over night. In principle, this is not unlike the wildfires where funding must be provided during high fire years to address unforeseen weather and fires using the Government mechanism of a “suppression vote.” However, forest health does not have this benefit where funds, in addition to the allocated budget, can be made available under unforeseen insect outbreaks. The forest health staff has to work within their limited budget when this situation arises or just turn their backs on the explosion. Insects and disease have the advantage under this fiscal approach.

The staffing for the forest health program implementation has been reduced to a few regional forest health specialists and Forest District forest stewardship staff. However, the District staffing has also been reduced to the point where the individual Stewardship Officers are stretched and can only deal with the high political priority activities. Forest health monitoring and assessment are not at the top of their priority list. Consequently, forest health management struggles to keep up with the very basic management handled by regional staff and the “off the corner of their desks” District staff efforts, if anything. Forest health “boots on the ground” are very limited.

MFLNRO FOREST HEALTH PROGRAM FOCUS

The limited forest health program staffing and budget has required management to prioritize and focus on:

- Aerial overview monitoring of forest disturbances (insects and diseases)
- Treatments² for the two priority defoliator insects (i.e., western spruce budworm and hemlock looper)
- Hazard ratings for stem rusts
- Providing advice to other Branches and ministries
- Treating priority areas (e.g., Southern Interior caribou habitat, mule deer winter range habitat and priority invasive species)
- Detection and priority treatments for major bark beetle species to maintain mid-term timber supply

² Defoliator treatments commonly involve aerial spraying with *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Btk) a biological insecticide developed in Canada. This natural bacterium, which occurs in soils, is sprayed on forests to protect the tree foliage from damaging insects.

These activities and their level within these priorities are, at best, the “very basics.” Risk areas due to lack of resource attention include:

- Detecting and aggressively treating MPB in areas that are still healthy (e.g., Kootenay-Boundary area) to prevent the recurrence of another regional epidemic
- Protecting critical caribou habitat throughout the interior with aggressive defoliator treatments
- Managing Douglas-fir bark beetle aggressively to protect critical wildlife habitat and timber supply
- Monitoring and treating key defoliator insects adequately
- Monitoring of the growth and yield of young forest stands for use in timber supply projections adequately
- Monitoring and adapting silviculture practices to accommodate pest risks
- Monitoring the changes in pest distribution and impacts associated with climate change
- Developing the required forest pest impact modeling related to forest stand growth and yield
- Implementing an aggressive eradication program on invasive species to protect sensitive ecosystems and prevent international trade sanctions due to forest insects

Failure to provide an adequate forest health program will result in:

- Loss of critical wildlife habitat
- Loss in timber supply
- Decrease in timber value
- Loss of non-timber forest values and community diversification opportunities
- Inadequate forest growth and yield projections for use in timber supply projections under climate change scenarios
- Loss of markets and added costs due to the establishment of regulated invasive species.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government to:

- 1) Maintain current regional and provincial staffing levels with adequate operational funding
- 2) Provide additional dedicated forest health staffing and associated funding (\$1 million/year) at the Forest District level of one person/District in Districts with high priority forest healthy issues
- 3) Provide a designated program commitment of \$10 million/year (additional \$1.5 million/year) of stable operational funding to conduct fundamental monitoring and operational activities to protect Provincial forests from unacceptable damage by pests
- 4) Establish a “suppression vote” to provide reactionary funding for operational treatments of unpredicted outbreaks