

Challenges of Balancing Forest Harvesting Economics with Forest Conservation and Management

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Abstract

Hectare by hectare conflicts does not lend themselves well for managing and maintaining a viable forest industry and ecological integrity. These conflicts will continue until the concept of Sustainable Forest Management Planning (SFMP) is embraced where clear objectives and thresholds are set for management units. A return to coordinated approach to land use planning is necessary today to help set the direction going forward.

Another way to frame the challenge is achieving the balance between human well being¹, of which a viable forest industry is a surrogate, and ecological integrity².

A viable forest industry directly provides stable and lasting employment, wages/benefits, tax revenue, business opportunities, and infrastructure. Indirectly, the same viable industry supports a substantial tax base driven by the secondary and induced employment opportunities. In turn, these revenues support affordable, stable, large scale social programs such as education and health. Furthermore, the products produced come from a truly renewable resource, which supports green energy initiatives, sequesters carbon, reduces demand for fossil fuel based products and helps meet the increasing world demand for wood products.

In order to maintain a viable forest industry, companies need a stable forest policy environment that accommodates change in a planned and periodic fashion (business certainty) and to be able to achieve an acceptable return on investment (or capital employed). Part of this viability is predicated on a sufficient and certain economic flow of timber (wood flow) to maintain investments in infrastructure which include both harvesting and milling capacity. Certainty of access to a stable, harvestable land base is crucial to wood flow, otherwise investment in harvest planning is risky, market response is poor, profitability declines, investor and customer confidence erodes and community economic stability is undermined. If access to a stable wood flow is not achieved then government may need to look at land use plans and rules pertaining to them to see if changes are necessary.

¹ Human well being is a condition in which all members of society can determine and meet their needs and have a large range of choices and opportunities to fulfill their potential. Source: EBM Handbook, CIT, 2004 p.5

² Ecological integrity is a quality or state of an ecosystem in which it is considered complete or unimpaired; including the natural diversity of species and biological communities, ecosystems processes and functions, and both the ability to absorb disturbance (resistance) and to recover from disturbance (resilience). Source: EBM Handbook, CIT, 2004 p.4

In order to maintain high level of ecological integrity, it is recognized that areas need to be set aside and maintained in an undeveloped state. Critical linkages/corridors and sufficient special habitats need to be protected for species. Areas need to be set aside for old growth representation, rare and endangered species, critical habitat for a myriad of species, and sensitive sites like riparian habitats. Other areas require reduced rates of harvest to protect water quality and quantity, visual management, cultural resources, etc.

Requirements for an economic flow of timber and ecological integrity can cause watershed by watershed, cutblock by cutblock and even hectare by hectare debates as to appropriate highest and best use. These debates waste an incredible amount of time and energy and lead to uncoordinated decisions being made on the harvestable land base. These debates will continue until the concept of sustainable forest management planning (SFMP) is embraced where clear objectives and thresholds are set for management units. Further, the SFMP objectives and thresholds must be set in the context of sustainable resource management plans (SRMP) which meet the same needs across the full suite of resource values on the landscape (aka: higher level plans).

A SRMP process needs to bring together representatives from government ministries, the resource industries and businesses, ENGO's, First Nations, communities and other stakeholders to discuss expectations for the overall land base. The SFMP process (and SRMP processes for the other resource industries and businesses) needs to bring together the same kinds of representatives to discuss expectations for the management of their respective resource values (e.g. for the forest sector it is the harvestable land base) in the context of the overall resource objectives of the SRMP across the land base of that particular sustainable management unit. It needs to be recognized that stakeholders groups will come with different perspectives and ideas, but through open dialogue and debate the process should lead to problem solving not viewing the process as a war to be won. Everyone must expect tradeoffs. From these expectations, a suite of clearly defined resource management coordination objectives can be developed which will set direction for land use planning in a management unit.

In order to put rigor and definition to the objectives, thresholds need to be established. These thresholds need to apply to both ecological integrity and resource access to support a viable forest industry. Thresholds can be expressed, for example, in terms of percentage of suitable habitat required by a focal species or cubic metres required for a particular woodshed. Monitoring of these thresholds needs to be undertaken by a government "score keeper" to ensure land use decisions do not breach these thresholds. Part of the review would be to examine total historic impacts to date as well as cumulative and amplified effects.

Future land use decisions need to be vetted through a senior government "gatekeeper" to ensure consistency with provincial government objectives, higher level plans, overall SFMP/SRMP resource management coordination objectives set for the management unit and thresholds established. The "gatekeeper" would rigorously, comprehensively, objectively, and transparently analyze and document the benefits and costs of any land use decision.

At the end of the day, hectare by hectare conflicts do not lend themselves well for managing and maintaining a viable forest industry and ecological integrity. A return to a coordinated approach to land use planning is necessary today to help set the direction going forward.