

“RESTORING FORESTRY IN BC¹”

Comments by Bill Bourgeois, PhD, RPF (Ret)

“The story of the industry’s decline and the case for regional management” by Mr. Bob Williams is well-tended and may be a response to the frustration many of us foresters and concerned citizens have had in the political direction regarding the management of BC forests over the last two (2) decades. However, it is my view there are comments by the author that I strongly disagree with and proposed strategies that are impractical and not presented in a manner that will help us move forward. Having said this, there are issues identified that are real and need action. Status quo is not an option. Failure to adapt and commit to continuous improvement in long-term forest stewardship of BC forests would be a tragedy.

WE HAVE FAILED!

I would like to start by strongly disagreeing with the claims that:

“We have a monumental failure on our hands—forestry in British Columbia. Almost everything about forestry in BC is wrong, given that this marvellous resource is endowed to us by nature.”

“We have pretended that we’ve developed a scientifically sound base for sustainable forestry practice. We’ve pretended we have a successful industry. We’ve pretended we have a successful licensing and cutting program. We’ve pretended we get full value for our trees and that we have a proper and competitive system for selling timber and cutting rights. We’ve pretended we have good public and corporate managers alike. On all of these points, and more, we have failed.”

Yes we have issues on several of these items but I do not believe we are at a stage of failure on any of them. I will not go into detail regarding my disagreements on all the points but provide comments on some of the big issues from my perspective.

We have not failed in the management of BC forests!

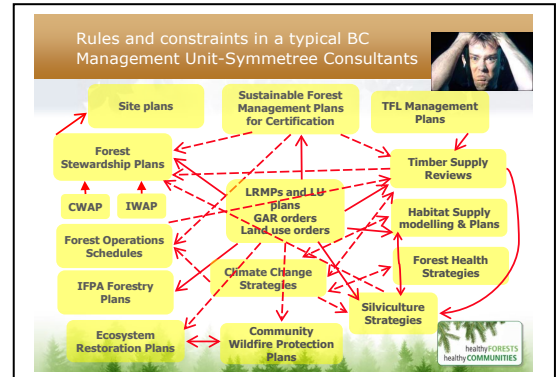
- 1) **We do practice scientifically based forest management.** Politicians know very well that policies are informed by science but do not drive them, politics does! The author cannot put all the blame on foresters or companies for not applying all the known science to forest management. He also knows that just because science tells us what to do, it does not always include the economic realities. It should be remembered BC was a world leader in forest research in the 1970’s-1990’s but Governments (Provincial and Federal) and industry significantly reduced their forest management research programs as well as funding to academic institutions. This is totally unacceptable when at the same time demanding the use of science.

¹ Bob Williams, “Restoring Forestry in BC,” Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, January 2018, 33p.

2) **The industry has been successful.** It has provided the wealth that has contributed a major component to our Provincial economy. The industry has changed over the years, and there are issues regarding commitment to community resiliency and sustainable forest management. However, I believe the author’s measure of success may be different from mine and those of the forest management decision-makers over the past decades, including politicians.

3) **The BC licensing and cutting program does have issues.**

We have known this for over 30 years but it has been politically unacceptable to make the necessary changes. Rather than make the necessary changes with major disruption to the industry, communities and economy, Governments have decided to “tweak” the existing model which has produced a mess. However, this does not justify moving to the model he proposes which I comment on below.

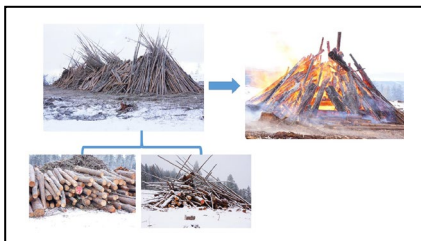


4) **The tenure system** has been an issue for decades. Area-

based tenures make up ~25% of the Crown forest land base with the remainder licensed under volume-based tenures. It is broadly accepted the former is preferred but attempts to move in this direction in a major way have resulted in negative public reaction for various reasons, none of which relate to the quality of forest management. Governments have been fully aware of the issue but view it as a politically sensitive area to avoid.

As part of tenure reform it would be beneficial if the responsibility for the management of the forest is separate from the manufacturing. Most BC forest companies, with some exceptions, focus on the latter and only do what is necessary in forest management to meet the Regulations. The mind-set, expertise and performance measures of a mill manager are very different from that of the forest manager. As long as we have mill managers dictating the conditions related to forest management, we will continue to struggle. The USA major forest companies, with the exception of Weyerhaeuser, have recognized this and sold their lands to a separate forest management entity. This approach has been both rejected by previous BC Governments and opposed by BC companies based on the premise (a red herring) they need a secure wood supply through tenure to obtain bank loans. Tenure is not included as an asset on the company balance sheet. Security of wood supply can be provided in other ways. BC manufacturing companies without tenure have been very profitable.

5) **I don’t know of anyone who says we “get full value for our trees.”** This is a long standing issue that



continues. I agree, we are not getting full value from our trees because Governments throughout the years have only talked about it and provided political spin with doing nothing concrete to address the problem. The major forest licensees do not believe the secondary wood manufacturing sector adds value and I agree with the author, they do not “think of them as customers” but a group that reduces their timber

supply and cause annoyances. The greater competition for the expected reduced available timber supply suggests there is a high risk this will continue, if Government intervention is not forthcoming.

- 6) **The stumpage system is complicated** and should only be debated with people who have expertise in this area. I am not one of them so will be silent on this important topic.
- 7) **I think we have forest companies who are good corporate managers.** However, this is measured on the basis of what they do for their primary “client”, the shareholders. The industry does not do well in managing, on their own, the forest for the public. They manage according to Government Regulations and policies. If management is inadequate it is the fault of the directives and the monitoring of such. We know what to do to improve this within the existing regulatory framework infrastructure (<https://tinyurl.com/y97jbkyk>).

A NEW WAY FORWARD

It is my view **the best way forward is to build on what we have, using the knowledge collected over the years** (e.g., results of the Peel and Pearse Royal Commissions) and updated to the current situation. We should not be “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.”

If we are to be successful in moving forward to realize as much of the full benefits of BC forests as possible, we need to remember:

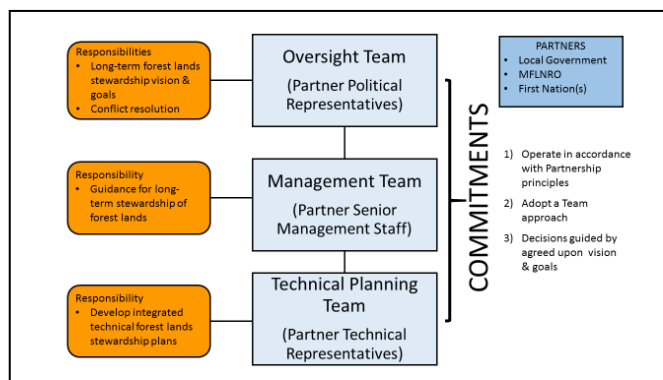
The BC model needs significant changes and application of the principles of adaptive management and continual improvement to meet the long-term stewardship needs of BC forests.

- Politicians, regardless of Party, do not like major change to infrastructure.
- The bureaucracy does not like major change and prefers status quo, unless otherwise directed.
- BC forest companies do not like change and will oppose any suggestions that might potentially impact their bottom line.
- Communities have not been engaged in influencing strategic forest management decisions until recently.
- First Nations want to be involved in the forest sector but not in a form that is contrary to their Rights and Title.

I am not sure the author has fully applied these points in developing their recommended model. If the necessary changes are to occur, it will take Government leadership. They are the custodian of the BC forest asset.

The author proposes a community-based model for the management of BC forests. This appears to be predicated on experiences related to Community Forests, community managed tenures and the experiences in Sweden. As I understand the argument, local or regional decision-making will be better than the existing centralized model. In theory, I would agree with this but in practice communities are not positioned to take on the larger role of the forest manager. **A partnership between local communities, First Nations and Government that identifies the broad vision and goals has a greater potential of success by incorporating the skills and interests of these key parties without expanding to**

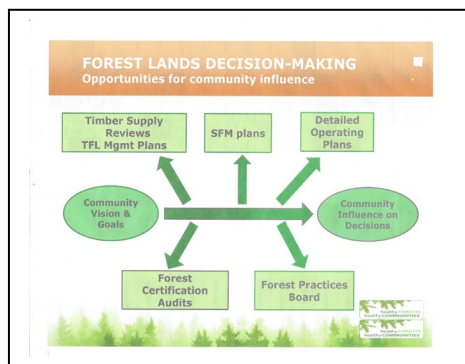
areas of discomfort. This overall guidance could be the necessary direction to forest managers relative to achieving the vision and goals of both the Province and the communities.



A model such as this would meet the overall objectives of the author but be much less disruptive, less costly and have a higher potential for acceptance by Government and others concerned about the future of BC forests (<https://tinyurl.com/ybg7w9eu>). A model such as this has been proposed by the Northern Rockies Regional Municipality.

Why enter into a new model that "...will be within regions encompassing our extensive public forests." We have just gone through the reorganization of the Forest Service in creating the MFLNRO. It was costly and after 7 years is still developing. Why suggest another major "... dramatic change, to democratize the centre in order to empower the communities..." when we can work within the existing model to tackle the issues and achieve the goals? However, it will take leadership from the Government and a willingness of rural communities to deliver what is needed from them. Without both of these it will be a failure and the status quo will continue.

I support more community influence as suggested by the author but this can be done without the risks noted by him. However, I do not support the proposed regional administrative model. The current forest



administrative infrastructure model can be used to guide Provincial management while including the opportunity for communities to work within it to meet their objectives, recognizing the nature of the resources within their region and desired composition of the economic composition of their community. This involves communities/regions identifying a vision for their local forests within the overall Provincial vision. This vision would guide forest managers in the management of the local forests. We know how to do this, **all we need is leadership from Government that recognizes the need for community influence and willingness to accept flexibility and**

innovation. A description of this is posted on the *Healthy Forests-Healthy Communities* website (<https://tinyurl.com/mzrgmlh>).

One area I fully agree with the author is **the creation of a legally binding Charter to guide forest decision-making in BC.** I would add a vision and goals to accompany this document so forest managers will need to demonstrate how their decisions are moving forest management toward achieving these statements. Why do we need to produce another Charter? The Commission on Resources and Environment produced one several years ago which is valid today. Also, strategic thinking foresters have done one since. Why

not build on these? The problem is not the Charter but the willingness of Government to adopt a legally binding one. Is Government interested in demonstrating leadership by doing this?

The idea of a “Forest General” or Chief Forester reporting to the legislature has value but this can be done within the existing system. Over the last decade we have experienced some Cabinet Ministers proposing to remove the Chief Forester from the role of such decisions as Allowable Annual Cuts (AAC) and leaving this to Cabinet. Fortunately, common sense prevailed but it showed this is a possibility and the Chief Forester reporting to the Legislature would require broader discussion on such a topic.

We should learn from the *Healthy Forests-Healthy Communities (HFHC)* dialogue initiative of 2011-2013 where concerned citizens in 21 communities across BC shared their views regarding the future of BC forests. The outcome provided priority issues and related actions (<https://tinyurl.com/yd3e6te8>). We need to build on the recommendations in dealing with the needed changes. Five (5) years later, little has been done by Government and priority actions remain (<https://tinyurl.com/ybwsqulb>).

The author provides suggestions on a few forest management approaches, such as growing forests for value not volume. This is simplistic, given the BC geographic and productivity variations. We learned in the 1970’s that products from forest stands are site specific. Some lend themselves to value and others to volume. This is the only way to make the silviculture treatments economically justified and provide a long-term sustainable timber supply that will help moving toward community resiliency. The HFHC report provides a much more comprehensive list of actions to improve forest management than included by the author.

We commonly don’t apply what we already know. This has to stop if we are to progress.

CONCLUSION

We have not failed in the management of BC forests. **We have challenges to address but these can be done within the existing model**, if:

- Government is willing to take leadership,
- Politicians, foresters and forest managers apply what we know, and
- Politicians listen to communities, forest professionals and citizens concerned about the future of BC forests.