

Wilderness Tourism Association



BRITISH COLUMBIA | CANADA

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Honourable Pat Bell
Minister of Jobs, Tourism and Innovation
PO Box 9071 Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC, V8W9E9

Honourable Steve Thomson
Minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations
P.O. Box 9049, Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC, V8W9E2

Dear Ministers

Re: The possible changes to Visual Quality Objectives and other 'constraints' in the Hwy 16 corridor

The Wilderness Tourism Association (WTA) has prepared this letter in response to the information and statements that have been put forth by many in the forest industry, local governments and the provincial governments regarding the changing or elimination of Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) and other land use objectives along Hwy 16 and in other beetle impacted areas. As an industry sector that relies on visual quality (and other land use objectives) for the experiences that we sell to the world, these land use objectives are critical for our success and must be protected throughout the province.

Tourism makes a significant contribution to local economies and the overall provincial economy. Nature based tourism alone generates \$1.6 billion for BC and is a major driver of BC's \$13 billion plus tourism industry. Tourists come to British Columbia because of our wilderness and natural reputation. Our natural endowments are a major drawing card that attracts tourists to B.C. They serve as a vital 'backdrop' to many tourism activities, and validates the holiday experience of many visitors. Our wilderness and natural areas are also a major reason why many British Columbians spend their vacation dollars at home, exploring their own province. The Hwy 16 corridor is an integral part of this experience.

The actual dollar value of maintaining forested landscapes to the tourism industry is hard to quantify. However, we know from the limited studies that have been done that tourists are less likely to return to BC when they experience significantly altered landscapes. Once the visual quality drops below the tourist's acceptable level or expectation, the tourist no longer visits the area and the tourism revenue is lost. Those tourists will go elsewhere for the experience they seek. The mountain pine beetle epidemic hasn't really changed anything. Grey trees are better than logged cut blocks to the tourist. They see the pine beetle killed trees as part of a natural process, which they accept quite readily. In fact, a MOF study of Public Perceptions of Mountain Pine Beetle Attack and Resulting Salvage Operations found that people prefer grey or dead pine trees over harvesting (Ministry of Forests and Range, 2007). Residents of MPB-affected communities are slightly more accepting of harvesting. In many cases the secondary understory growth is already rapidly 'greening' up the grey or dead trees.

"Ensuring a sustainable future for BC's wilderness tourism industry through leadership, advocacy, and stewardship."

The main rationale put forward for removing VQOs and other objectives is to sustain the longevity and operations of local mills (i.e. jobs). However, it should be clarified that changing or removing constraints such as VQOs will have little effect on the regions timber supply. For example, according to data provided by the forest licensees and Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations in the Lakes TSA, which services Burns Lake, reducing VQOs as proposed, will provide only about 10,000m³/year. To put this into perspective, the AAC for the Lakes TSA is 2,000,000m³. The figures are almost the same in the neighbouring Morice TSA which services Houston. 10,000m³/year of timber supply, but tourism could be irreparably damaged for 30 years. Tourism is far more important to our local economies than the salvage value of this little volume of pine trees to a mill. Prior to the fire at the Burns Lake mill, Forest licensees in the Lakes Forest District were not even close to logging at the allocated AAC, harvesting a little over half of their AAC in 2010, nor had they come close to their AAC in the couple years previous. The reason being is that markets have been soft for pine trees.

The forest industry doesn't gain or lose jobs by changing the VQOs. What will change is that the forest companies will be able to access a very short-term supply of more profitable timber in the VQO areas (i.e. bigger and better quality pine trees, and spruce trees, which are closer to mills and therefore cheaper to access). Often VQOs are in the same areas as Old Growth Management Areas (OGMAs). Sacrificing the long-term viability of tourism for short-term forestry gains is neither reasonable nor desirable for the long-term benefits to our economy. Economically, removing VQOs just doesn't make sense.

The accelerated rate of forest development (road development and tree harvesting) is already placing increasing pressure on the tourism industries ability to deliver quality tourism experiences. The changing or eliminating of existing VQOs and the associated increase in forest harvesting activity will further impact the tourism industry. Such developments will constrain tourism business' ability to operate, make most businesses reluctant to expand, and discourage investment and entry by new operators. Surely these are not the type of actions we want in our effort to "Build upon the *Super, Natural British Columbia* brand as a travel motivator" as identified in your government's five year tourism strategy *Gaining the Edge*. Very few VQO were ever established in the Lakes TSA and along the Hwy 16 corridor so the few that exist need to be maintained. It should be noted that landscapes under VQOs have actually decreased across the province since 2004 by approximately 500,000 hectares, contrary to the perception of politicians and forest industry officials.

Visual Quality Objective decisions have been realized after years of deliberation, review, analysis and planning with strong participation from volunteer stakeholders and the public. We are certainly sympathetic to the losses that have occurred in Burns Lake and the need to develop employment for that community. However, we question how significant changes to land use plans and visual landscape inventories can come about simply through forest industry proposals and associated political decisions. The processes are disproportional at best.

The forest industry is facing difficult times and we all acknowledge that. This situation is expected to only get worse. But changing VQOs to accommodate more logging is myopic and extremely shortsighted. Now with the dire predictions in the forest industry, what we really need to be doing for our local economies is not removing VQOs, but rather strengthening our tourism economy by increasing VQOs and associated land use objectives that support tourism. A stronger forestry industry that includes the tourism sector will help diversify our provincial economy. We are all dependent on the forest industry and government to help lead the way.

Respectfully,

Evan Loveless
Executive Director
Wilderness Tourism Association of BC