

BC'S REFORESTATION CRISIS¹

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In less than a decade, British Columbia has gone from environmental leader to environmental laggard in stewarding one of our most important natural resources. And it could not come at a worse time, as we grapple with climate change and its horrendous impact on our forests. In what was once one of the greener jurisdictions on earth a major reforestation crisis is underway. A backlog of lands in desperate need of replanting has doubled in a decade, while public investments in tree planting have plummeted.

But before plumbing the depths, let's celebrate past achievements — achievements that crossed political lines under provincial Social Credit and New Democratic Party administrations and federal Liberal and Progressive Conservative regimes. In the mid 1980s, BC had a substantial problem on its hands. Years of neglect following logging, forest fires and pest outbreaks had left vast swaths of land with too few trees — a condition known in industry and government parlance as Not Satisfactorily Restocked or “NSR.” Back then the province paid for virtually all tree-planting, a practice that the Social Credit government of the day wisely abolished in 1986, requiring the companies that profited from logging public forests to put something back.

But the transfer of responsibilities did nothing to address the by then sizeable NSR backlog. So between 1986 and 1998, the provincial and federal governments invested an average of \$165 million per year to renew public forests. The number of trees planted and the area reforested more than doubled; the area of land cleared of brush so that trees could grow more freely increased fivefold; and there was a sevenfold increase in the number of trees thinned, so that the remaining trees could grow faster. Back then NSR shrunk faster than the melting pre-Olympics snow, and the provincial and federal governments owned the reforestation podium.

No more. In 2001, public reforestation investments stood at \$45 million. A year later, those same investments had been slashed to \$7 million. By 2004, they had reached an anemic \$3 million.

Incredibly, over the same timeframe the area of BC forest attacked by the mountain pine beetle went from 785,497 hectares to more than 7 million hectares. In other words, while the area of land filled with hundreds of millions of beetle-killed trees increased by a factor of 9, the amount of public dollars spent on replanting decreased by 93 per cent — all this from a government that professed to care about stewarding our publicly owned natural resources.

In more recent years, government spending has increased somewhat. In 2008-09, provincial funding of reforestation efforts through the “Forests for Tomorrow” program stood just shy of

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\$26 million and 6.79 million trees were planted (unpublished data for the 2009-10 fiscal year pegs planting at 13.5 million trees, with dollars spent not yet available).

All to the good, until one considers the context. Twenty years ago we spent six times as much in public dollars and for that money planted 31 times more seedlings on average. By any measure, from a government that professes to value “results” such a performance can only be called an embarrassment.

And now, comes the wakeup call. The Ministry of Forests says that the true extent of the reforestation crisis is far worse than previously stated. An estimated 700,000 hectares has suddenly appeared as new tracts of public land in need of reforestation. These previously “missing” lands, reported for the first time as such by Ministry personnel last fall, increase the total area of NSR by 1,750 Stanley Parks in size.

And even this likely understates the problem. Since 2003, 673,000 hectares of land or 1,682 Stanley Parks worth of provincial forest have burned, yet according to Ministry estimates the NSR attributable to forest fires over that same timeframe rose only 24,000 hectares or just 60 Stanley Parks in size.

Such disparities inspire little confidence that we know the true extent of today’s reforestation challenge. Again, for a government that says it is committed to “no net deforestation,” and that claims to be concerned about climate change, this is inexcusable.

Planting trees is one of the tangible ways we have to maintain healthy forests, forests that provide an incredible array of environmental services, such as protecting the lands surrounding our drinking water reservoirs, and that provide for forest industry jobs today and in the future. Maintaining healthy forests is also one of the few ways we have to store and pull carbon out of the atmosphere.

Planting trees, then, is one of the soundest green infrastructure investments we can make. We only need to look to the past for the great results recorded when such ideas are embraced.