

BUZZ SAWED: BC'S FOREST SERVICE¹

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There are many things that distinguish "supernatural" British Columbia from other jurisdictions. But one of the most enduring of them is its abundance of publicly owned lands. While many of us may not realize it, about 94 per cent of B.C. is Crown or public land. And over the decades the wealth generated from that land -- the royalties and taxes from forest, natural gas, and mining activities -- has enriched public programs such as health care, education and transit to the tune of tens of billions of dollars.

Lately, however, our provincial government is behaving as if there's nothing particularly important about our great, shared natural assets. Nowhere is this clearer than in the speed at which one of B.C.'s longest standing public agencies has been gutted and dismantled -- to the point where it is dangerously close to becoming irrelevant. I speak of our Forest Service. In less than a decade, the provincial government has axed one quarter of the agency's staff (1,006 positions) and cut the number of fully staffed district offices in half, effectively severing the link between the agency and 21 communities that it once so ably served. The depth of the cuts to the nearly 100-year-old agency is a serious concern. And when one bores down to what the cutbacks mean on the ground -- our shared ground with First Nations -- the alarm bells really go off.

Vast Responsibilities for Those Who Remain

To give perspective, consider the United States and its national Forest Service of nearly 30,000 employees. Each of its employees is responsible for an average of 2,700 hectares of national forestland. B.C.'s Forest Service is roughly one-tenth the size, but individual staff members are responsible for nearly 7.5 times more land -- about 20,000 hectares each. And in northeastern B.C., where the natural gas industry is cutting through forests faster than a knife through soft butter, each Forest Service staff person is responsible for about 232,000 hectares of land, or more than 580 Stanley Parks each.

Just about every facet of B.C. Forest Service work has been compromised by the cuts. Field investigations by compliance and enforcement staff -- who work to ensure that companies do not illegally log trees on public lands or engage in environmentally destructive logging -- are down by more than 14,450 visits annually over what they were a decade ago, and will likely continue to decline due to more recent job cuts. Audits of company reports on the value and volume of Crown timber they log are slipping as Forest Service "scaling" personnel diminish in number. With the most recent job losses, government scalers are now responsible for an average of 36,961 truckloads of logs each -- a 7,500 truckload per person increase since 2002-2003.

Meanwhile, inventory specialists -- who count trees to help determine sustainable rates of logging -- have been reduced to just 39 people. That's down from an inventory staff at Victoria headquarters alone of 100 people in the early 1990s and at least another 48 inventory staff in regional and district offices. Is it any wonder, then, that government accounts of how many trees are found where are in some cases 30 years or more out of date?

¹ The Tyee, December 15, 2010

Campbell's Swing of the Axe

As if the drop in public servants wasn't troubling enough, what is left of the Forest Service has been cleaved in two as a result of October's cabinet reorganization -- a move that saw internationally renowned departments within the Forest Service such as its 83-year-old research branch completely disbanded and scattered among four different ministries. To what end, no one inside the Forest Service seems to know. All of this and more occurred against a backdrop of escalating forest losses due to a surging natural gas industry, increasing losses of trees due to devastating insect attacks and severe forest fires, and a rapidly growing stock of insufficiently reforested lands.

Twenty years ago, a crisis of a different sort was confronted when the so-called "war in the woods" saw pitched battles between environmental organizations, unions and rural communities. Back then, the provincial government correctly responded by appointing the Forest Resources Commission to solicit public opinion and arrive at a new vision for B.C.'s public forests. Today's challenging environment demands no less a response. It's time for an independent commission to determine whether or not the public service can any longer protect our publicly owned forests. Until the commission is finished we should declare a moratorium on any further cuts to our dramatically reduced Forest Service, and a halt to the cabinet reorganization that almost certainly means an end to the institution as we know it.