



Remarks to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia's Special Committee on Timber Supply

By Ben Parfitt, Resource Policy Analyst, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
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Check Against Delivery

First, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to be here today and to thank all Committee members and advisors for giving so much of their time to this important issue.

I will be submitting a more detailed written document to you that will amplify on some of the remarks I make today, which will focus on three areas of concern.

My first concern about the possible courses of action being contemplated by this Committee rests with what the potential social and economic fallout, particularly for rural communities, could be.

By far, the action item of greatest consequence being considered by you is the proposed lifting of limited constraints on logging in order to provide increased access to timber for the forest industry in the near to mid term. And it is here that I will focus most of my remarks.

Information before you shows very clearly that no matter what is done, there are looming and very large reductions in logging that must occur due to the extent of the more than decade-long mountain pine beetle outbreak as well as the elevated rates of logging that have occurred over the past decade in response to it. Another aggravating factor is the intensified logging over more than two decades that occurred in response to the smaller, but nonetheless significant, mountain pine beetle outbreak that occurred on the Chilcotin plateau.

What I don't think the documents before the Committee have stressed enough, however, is that the sawmilling industry that built up—and in fact expanded—in response to those insect attacks now has an accumulated milling horsepower that far, far exceeds what the forests can reasonably be expected to sustain. And that excess horsepower is only going to become more problematic as time goes on, as more forest is logged, and as more forest becomes commercially unattractive as the lodgepole pine trees attacked and killed by the beetles further deteriorate.

Presentations made to Committee members by senior public servants show clearly that in the Prince George area, sawmills can consume 15.8 million cubic metres of wood per year. (One cubic metre equals one telephone pole). Yet local forests in the near term will only be able to provide 6.4 million cubic metres, or 40 per cent of mill needs.¹

Around Burns Lake, the picture is much worse. Local mills can consume 1.9 million cubic metres of wood. Yet in the near term, future forests will only be able to provide for 26 per cent of mill needs. In and around Quesnel and Williams Lake, the picture is only marginally better, with local forests likely to be able to meet only one third of existing sawmill capacity in future years.

These numbers point to very, very tough decisions that must be made to bring milling capacity in line with what the forests can reasonably be expected to provide in future years—years in which climate change will pose even greater challenges to forest professionals than is already the case.

If the provincial government chooses to lift what I believe are entirely reasonable constraints on logging activities in what amounts to a relatively small portion of publicly owned forests, it will in effect be trying to expand supply to meet mill demands. That is a dangerously backwards response and one that will almost certainly have even more grave social and economic consequences.

Temporarily throwing more timber into the logging base for a period of time simply serves to mask the underlying problem. You can't log and mill what isn't there. The more we take now, the deeper the pain down the road. This explains why successive provincial administrations from Social Credit, to NDP to Liberal have all preferred to kick the problem down the road rather than coming to grips with the harsh reality of the "falldown" in logging rates that everyone, quite reasonably, should expect.

This in somewhat different words is precisely the same message that Committee members have heard from the industry itself, which is even more reason, I believe, for the Committee to show leadership on this difficult topic and avoid the pitfalls of following the road so frequently traveled over the past two decades.

As Canfor's Don Kayne noted in his comments to you two days ago:

It's a fact that the mountain pine beetle infestation will have a significant impact on the mid-term timber supply in the central Interior.

While it might be possible to increase the fibre supply, it is also a fact that mills will close. We have to acknowledge that there is simply not enough timber to run all the mills in the Interior.²

Mr. Kayne also raised in his remarks an overriding concern in the industry—one widely shared among professional foresters, woodworkers themselves, provincial civil servants, environmental organizations and others—about the need for ongoing forest inventories in order to ensure that we have the best information upon which to make sound decisions about how public forests are managed on the public's behalf.

This is the second issue that I would like to comment on. It strikes me that one of the central challenges before Committee members is to determine how much confidence can be placed in the projections on mid-term timber supplies before you. If there are outstanding questions about the robustness of the numbers and the assumptions that lie behind them, then it makes it difficult if not impossible to make informed decisions around relaxing present-day constraints on logging.

I believe that it was concerns within the ranks of the public service over the true state of the health of our forests that lay behind the leaking of the Mid-term Timber Supply Report now before the Committee and the leaking of the related Cabinet briefing document.³

Regardless of the motivating factor behind those leaks, however, there are several reasons to believe that the present health of our forests may not be as robust as we would like to think. And the question is are those concern reflected in the mid-term timber supply projections now before Committee members?

We now know due to the release of a recent Forest Practices Board report that the total area of BC's provincial forests that may need to be restocked with healthy young trees could exceed current reforestation efforts by more than one million hectares.⁴

We know further as a result of the ongoing work of forest scientists both within government and in academia, that many allegedly "free-growing" tree plantations are no longer, with many sites having fallen below even the minimum standards in terms of healthy stocks of living trees.⁵

We know further from the ongoing work of forest scientists that many of the areas of forest that may have been salvaged logged in response to the pine beetle were actually very poor candidates for logging in the first place because when they were clear-cut very substantial numbers of healthy younger trees that represented a good stock of trees in the mid-term were logged when they should not have been.

The cumulative effect of all of this is that the mid-term timber supply may be even less rosy than the already gloomy projections before you. And the only way to ascertain whether this is true will probably be through increased forest inventory work.

Further complicating matters are the huge challenges posed by climate change. A subject that some members of this Committee heard about recently when Doug Konkin, deputy minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, spoke before the Public Accounts Committee. Mr. Konkin made his remarks in response to concerns raised by BC's Auditor General about whether or not the government was meeting its obligations as far as timber management were concerned.

Mr. Konkin said, and I quote:

When you look forward into the future, we believe there will be more and more significant, unexpected disruptions. You look at the economy today and the diversity of the markets — what's happening in the marketplaces. You look at climate change. You look at mountain pine beetle, as an example of that. We think the primary focus has to be about building resilience into our forests and our forest management regime.

How do we develop targets within that very dynamic framework? I would absolutely argue that trying to specify a long-term timber supply target and have people believe that you can with certainty deliver a 20- or 50-year long-term timber supply target is highly dangerous. There are far too many things going on right now in the system to allow that.⁶

If in the words of one of our province's most senior public servants it is "highly dangerous" to project into the future, one has to ask how much more dangerous again it is to make projections based on an incomplete understanding of what the true health of our forests is?

Lastly, regarding climate change, the Committee needs to carefully consider what forest scientists are saying to the government about our uncertain future under a changing climate. And I would urge you to do so when thinking about the potential consequences of lifting today's remaining limited constraints on logging. In the most recent report of the BC Future Forest Ecosystem Science Council, the following point is made:

Cumulative environmental stress results in increasing uncertainty and deterioration in the services that humans have come to expect to receive from ecosystems, including the provision of a reliable supply of clean water from streams, a steady flow of timber from healthy forests, and nutritious forage for livestock and wildlife from healthy rangelands. While a generally warmer and wetter climate is likely to increase rates of tree growth, forage and wildlife production, and supplies of fresh water for some species and in some geographic areas, the broad scientific consensus is that the cumulative environmental stresses associated with the rapid rate of ecological and social change will outweigh these local benefits, causing a high risks of an overall decline in the provision of ecosystem services at the provincial level.⁷

The broad scientific consensus is that we must plan now for how we have healthier, more resilient forests in future years. It is hard to see how you get there by increasing the logging land base even further.

My third and last point before concluding is that the Committee and government would be well advised to heed the warnings being expressed by forest companies and others that lifting the constraints at this time could have significant consequences both domestically and internationally. British Columbians went through a protracted and very divisive set of land-use negotiations that in effect led to the creation of many of those patches of forest that are now reserved from logging. The industry, government, labour organizations, First Nations and environmental groups among others used the creation of that network of reserves in the drive to have numerous forests and logging operations certified as sustainably managed.

The question the Committee and the provincial government ought to ask is whether it is worth placing at risk British Columbia's hard-fought victories to obtain certification by going in and rewriting the rules now.

I myself have traveled in one of those reserve areas adjacent to Itcha Ilgachuz Provincial Park, a park created to, among other things, protect summer habitat for woodland caribou. The reserve was set up with the express purpose of protecting winter habitat for that species. Again, does this Committee and does the government want to reopen legislated land-use plans to, for example, open up such reserves to logging. What would news about logging such habitat do to the forest industry's hard-won certification efforts, markets for our forest products, and forest industry jobs in many interior-BC communities?

Over the past five years, I have had the opportunity to ponder some of the issues you as Committee members now wrestle with. This was done through the lens of trying to identify forest management options that would address the long-term interests of people working in the forest sector, and those people and organizations focused more on issues of forest conservation.

It was not easy. But what I found through working on two successive research reports was an encouraging degree of consensus. When people representing woodworkers and people representing

environmental organizations committed to trying to find solutions that benefitted both the environment and resource industry jobs, they found answers.

In 2007, in response to the rapid run-up in logging rates in BC's interior, the first of those reports was published. It brought together the BC Federation of Labour, the BC Government and Service Employees' Union, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, the Pulp, Paper and Woodworkers of Canada and the United Steelworkers, alongside ForestEthics, the Sierra Club of Canada BC Chapter, Sierra Legal Defence Fund (now Ecojustice) and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

What the unions (including all three unions representing forest industry workers in BC) and some of the province's leading environmental organizations agreed to was:

1. To increase forest conservation by banning clear-cut salvage logging in mixed forests.
2. To immediately reduce logging rates on the basis of an end to salvage logging in such forests.
3. To halt all logging of purer pine forests where sufficient numbers of living trees grew beneath the beetle-attacked dead trees.
4. To stop the egregious wasting and burning of usable logs at logging sites.
5. And to immediately identify those beetle-attacked forests that would not be logged by the forest industry and that made sense to reforest and to rehabilitate, with the provincial government assuming the costs and responsibilities for doing so.⁸

The findings of fieldwork studies conducted by provincial Forest Service staff and independent professional foresters informed most of those recommendations—recommendations that were squarely focused on ensuring healthy forests in future years, including forests that could provide a good supply of trees to log in the mid-term, if only they were left alone for now.⁹

Late in 2010, many of those same labour and environmental organizations came together once again, calling for a broad range of forest management reforms centred on the capacity of our forests and forest products to store carbon and to help us in our efforts to combat climate change.¹⁰

Many of the called for reforms were later embraced by forest industry representatives, including John Allan of the Council of Forest Industries.

What I learned during the work on those research reports is that while we face daunting challenges there are solutions. However, real solutions most often require that we resist the temptation to embrace quick fixes, because quick fixes almost always fail to address underlying problems.

Lifting logging restraints in response to today's timber supply crisis is one such quick fix. It will ultimately harm our environment and our economy alike.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I am happy to answer any questions. Again, thank you for this opportunity.

Notes

- 1 Kevin Kriese, Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations. Mid-Term Timber Supply Mitigation Options – Presentation for the Special Committee on Timber Supply. June 6, 2012.
- 2 Don Kayne, President and Chief Executive Officer. Presentation for the Special Committee on Timber Supply. July 9, 2012.
- 3 Mark Hume. "B.C. plan would open Interior's protected woods for logging." *Globe and Mail*. April 18, 2012.
- 4 Forest Practices Board. *How Much of British Columbia's forest is not satisfactorily restocked? And what should be done about it?* Special Report. June 2012.
- 5 Alex Woods and Wendy Bergerud. *Are Free-Growing Stands Meeting Timber Productivity Expectations in the Lakes Timber Supply Area?* Ministry of Forests and Range Forest and Range Evaluation Program. May 2008.
- 6 Doug Konkin, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations. Comments to Public Accounts Committee. June 11, 2012.
- 7 Sybille Haeussler, Evelyn Hamilton and Kristeene Weese. *Informing Adaptation of British Columbia's Forest and Range Management Framework to Anticipated Effects of Climate Change: A Synthesis of Research and Policy Recommendations*. Prepared for the BC Future Forest Ecosystem Scientific Council Conference and Workshop. June 1, 2012.
- 8 Ben Parfitt. *Over-cutting and Waste in BC's Interior: A Call to Rethink BC's Pine Beetle Logging Strategy*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives BC Office. June 2007
- 9 David Coates et. al. *Abundance of Secondary Structure in Lodgepole Pine Stands Affected by the Mountain Pine Beetle*. Report for the Chief Forester. May 2006.
- 10 Ben Parfitt. *Managing BC's Forests for a Cooler Planet: Carbon Storage, Sustainable Jobs and Conservation*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives BC Office. January 2010.