

Shortchanged

Tallying the Legacy of Waste in BC's Logging Industry



Waste wood piles near 100 Mile House, Fall 2008. GARTH LENZ PHOTO

IN 2008, THE CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES BEGAN TO ANALYZE how much usable wood was left behind at logging sites in British Columbia. The results, as presented here, are a first-ever documentation of annual waste volumes in each of BC's 29 forest districts over a five year period. The analysis finds that from 2004 to 2008, millions of usable logs were abandoned at BC logging sites, at a cost of thousands of foregone jobs and big increases in greenhouse gas emissions.

Contained in a [detailed spreadsheet](#) that can be downloaded from the CCPA website (www.policyalternatives.ca/reports/2009/03/woodwaste), the analysis draws on data submitted to the province by the companies who left the waste. It concludes that over the five year period, more than 17.5 million cubic metres of usable wood was abandoned at logging sites. That is enough material to fill a line of logging trucks lined bumper to bumper on the Trans-Canada Highway from Vancouver to Halifax and almost all the way back again.

In addition to chronicling overall wood waste, the analysis looks at pine logging and pine waste in BC's interior to make some sense of what logging companies have done in response to the mountain pine beetle. A similar exercise was undertaken with hemlock on the coast because of longstanding concerns over coastal mill closures and a lack of mills to process hemlock in particular.

The analysis forms the basis of a [complaint to BC's Forest Practices Board](#) (also on the CCPA website. It is based on hundreds of queries of a provincial database known as the Harvest Billing System.

An accompanying detailed data analysis, video and open letter are available at www.policyalternatives.ca/reports/2009/03/woodwaste

by Ben Parfitt

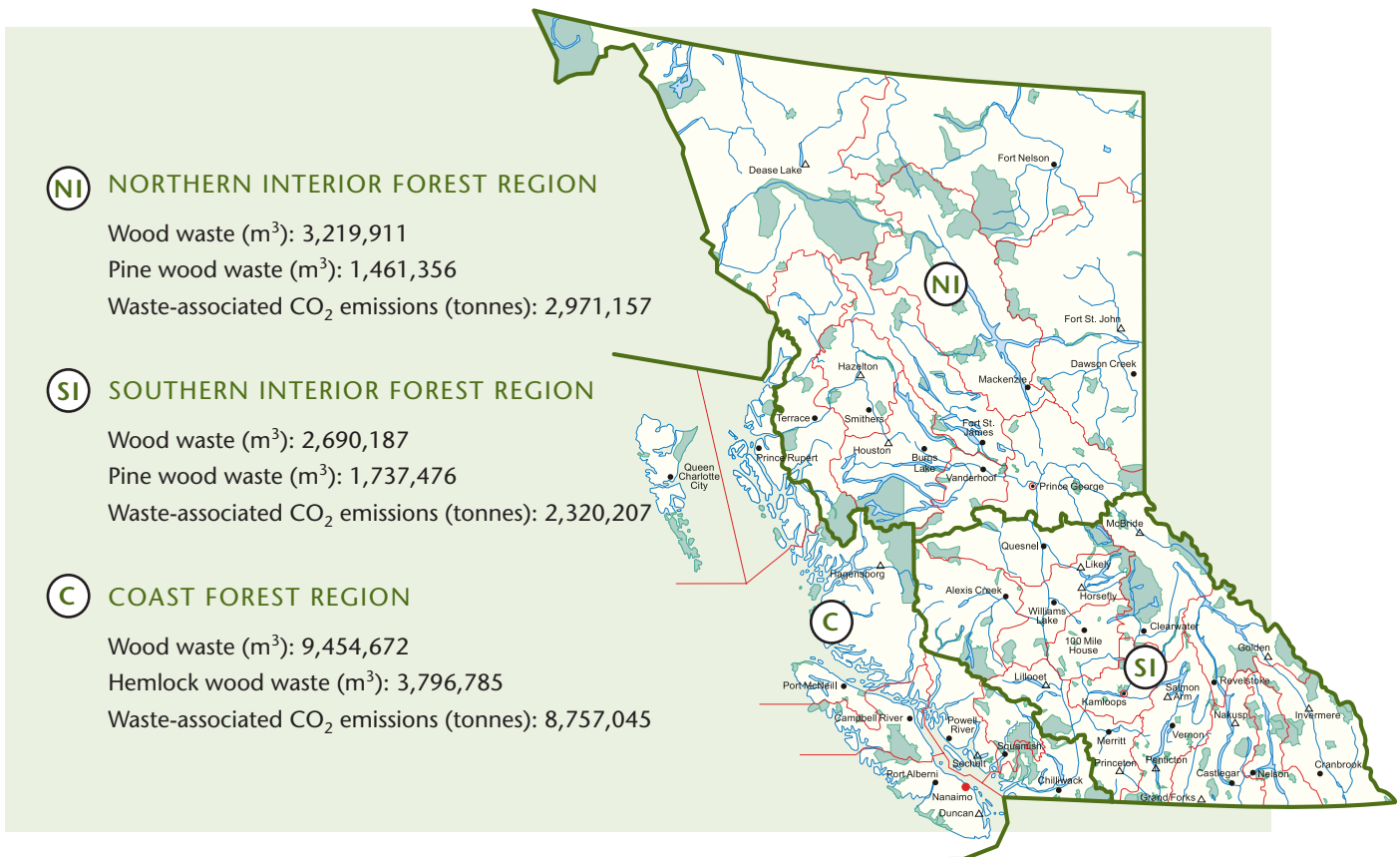
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The analysis finds that:

- In just one year on North Vancouver Island and the Central Coast, more than 1 million cubic metres of usable wood was abandoned, a fifth of everything logged, or 38,850 highway logging trucks worth of wood.
- Last year on the remote North Coast just under half of all usable logs were left behind at logging operations.
- In district after district, logging and wood waste levels frequently diverged. For example, in Quesnel logging rates fell 6 per cent in 2005 and 7 per cent in 2006 while wood waste levels increased respectively 937 per cent and 585 per cent.
- In some forest districts, logging companies reported zero or virtually no wood waste, while in immediately adjacent districts high waste levels were reported, suggesting lapses in reporting and enforcement.
- On BC's coast, where numerous sawmills have closed because the provincial government no longer requires companies that log public forests to operate mills, an average of 2.36 million cubic metres of usable wood was reported wasted each year, or 11 per cent of everything logged.
- Abandoned, usable logs store tremendous amounts of carbon that, if fully released to the atmosphere as heat-trapping CO₂, would increase BC's average annual greenhouse gas emissions by 5 per cent or 3.23 million tonnes.
- More than 2,400 forest manufacturing jobs are estimated on average to have been foregone annually based on usable wood waste volumes.



There is reason to believe, however, that the true waste problem is even greater than that presented to the Forest Practices Board.

First, government oversight of wood waste is decreasing.¹ Second, companies can legally leave certain usable logs (dead and dry pulp logs) behind and are not obliged to report such waste. Pulp log waste generally tracks sharply upward as markets decline. And third, usable wood waste figures originate with the logging companies. Company figures are contained in reports filed with the government and known as waste assessments. In the interior, the assessments are based on simple visual estimates of waste. No physical measurements are done. On the coast, physical measurements of abandoned logs are done on randomly selected plots of ground and waste piles in logged areas. An estimate is then rolled up for the larger logged area. On both the coast and the interior, Ministry of Forests personnel then audit at least one tenth of logged areas to determine whether company reports accurately reflect the actual amount of usable wood left behind.

Uncertainty over how much usable wood is wasted has serious implications for sound public policy since most BC forests are publicly owned. If public servants don't know how much wood is wasted, they can't confidently say how rapidly BC's forests are depleted, or what the resulting effect on biological diversity is, or what a sustainable rate of logging should be.

Fueling uncertainty is the unknown number of allegedly unusable logs that are routinely left behind following logging. Known as firmwood rejects, such logs generally have defects that make it difficult to extract lumber from them. Between 2004 and 2008, logging companies reported more than 1.1 million cubic metres of firmwood rejects on top of 17.5 million cubic metres of usable waste.

It is likely, however, that the true number of rejects is far higher. Only the rejects trucked to scaling sites are counted. Companies are not obligated to report the rejected logs they leave on the ground to rot or push into piles to be burned. The suspicion is that this is a major waste stream of special concern. For example:

- Pine trees in beetle-attacked forests are rapidly deteriorating, meaning the volume of unusable and therefore unreported wood waste is growing.
- Related to this, many forests are being logged faster in response to the declining wood quality. For example, a logging contractor in the Quesnel area interviewed for this research reported that some beetle-attacked forests that once yielded 300 cubic metres of sawlogs per hectare now yield just 180 cubic metres, meaning massive increases in waste as nearly twice the area of forest is cleared to deliver the same number of sawlogs.
- As more waste accumulates, reforestation becomes more difficult.

Millions of usable logs are being abandoned at BC logging sites, at a cost of thousands of foregone jobs and big increases in greenhouse gas emissions.

¹ On September 1, 2007 BC Timber Sales (a Crown-owned entity that auctions public timber) stopped doing its own waste surveys, opting instead to have the companies doing the logging do the work. The change was made to save costs.

Perhaps most significant is the context in which this waste is occurring.

In the interior, heightened logging in response to the beetles means a big decline in future logging rates. Wasting forest resources today hastens and deepens that decline. On the coast, failure to invest in new sawmills means that many prime logs are exported out of the province while droves of lower value logs are left to rot or be burned in the bush. This may explain why the CCPA found that coastal companies logged just 36 per cent of what their interior counterparts did, yet had double the waste.² Finally, in both the interior and coast regions, the province is considering more logging increases to promote new wood-fired electric power facilities. Are such increases justified given today's high waste levels?

To ensure that public forest resources are managed in the public interest, the CCPA has brought forward a complaint to the Forest Practices Board asking it to:

- Examine whether government audits are sufficient to ensure that companies accurately report wood waste;
- Determine whether company waste reports, which are often based on nothing more than visual estimates, properly capture true waste levels;
- Determine whether government auditors step up efforts in districts where companies report unusually high or unusually low levels of wood waste;
- Examine why there appears to be no correlation between changes in logging rates or area of forest logged and changes in wood waste levels;
- Examine whether some companies may be mischaracterizing wood waste and therefore avoiding paying financial penalties on what is left behind; and
- Determine whether or not the public can be confident that current reporting and oversight procedures accurately capture what usable wood is wasted.

In addition to the complaint, this analysis demands forceful government intervention to ensure that publicly-owned forest resources are not squandered and when logged are utilized to full public benefit.

² Between 2003 and 2007, coastal logging companies logged 107.4 million cubic metres of timber and left behind approximately 11.8 million cubic metres of usable wood waste. Corresponding figures for the interior were 285.7 million and 5.7 million cubic metres respectively.



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The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives is an independent, non-partisan research institute concerned with issues of social and economic justice. Founded in 1980, it is one of Canada's leading progressive voices in public policy debates. The CCPA is a registered non-profit charity and depends on the support of its more than 10,000 members across Canada.

ABOUT THE RESOURCE ECONOMICS PROJECT

The Resource Economics Project offers research and policy solutions that promote economic stability and environmental sustainability in BC's resource-dependent communities. The project aims to bridge the "jobs versus environment" divide.

Launched in 1999, it has produced reports and studies about how to implement Kyoto; a strategy for dealing with the mountain pine beetle outbreak; the economics of fish farms; a sustainable energy plan for BC; environmental tax shifting; and many other topics.

All Resource Economics Project publications are available free online. www.policyalternatives.ca/resource_economic_project_bc

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