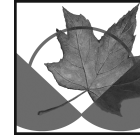


BATTLING THE BEETLE

Taking Action to Restore British Columbia's Interior Forests



CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
BC Office

Summary

British Columbia is on the cusp of the greatest forest health crisis ever to confront the province since forestry emerged as a major economic activity within its borders more than a century ago.

There are numerous reasons for the crisis. First and foremost is a large and as yet far from over beetle infestation that is killing millions of pine trees in the province's Interior. Second, generally warmer and drier weather, which many scientists believe will be with us for some time to come, is allowing more and more beetles to thrive. Third, a preponderance of older pine trees is exacerbating the outbreak by providing the beetles with the ideal food and breeding source. Last, and not least, Interior logging rates are rocketing upward in response to the beetles, fuelling concerns about the future of our forests, resource-dependent Interior communities and the provincial economy as a whole.

Once the current logging boom runs its course, harvesting rates will plummet leaving many forest dependent communities facing an uncertain economic future. That is why this paper argues that there must be a concerted effort now to address the unfolding crisis, an effort that goes far beyond the current response.

Thus far, the provincial government has narrowly focussed on increasing logging rates to capture income from the beetle-attacked trees before they lose their economic value. Comparatively little has been said about the need to invest in our forests, where those investments should be focussed, and where the funds to pay for those investments should come from.

In addition, little has been said about a number of disquieting trends that have exacerbated the current forest health crisis. For example:

- Public investments in reforestation have steadily declined as the area of beetle-attacked forest skyrocketed.
- Deep cuts to provincial Forest Service staff have robbed British Columbians of their collective eyes and ears on public forestlands at precisely the time when more, not fewer, public servants are needed.

- Companies continue to pay the province nominal stumpage fees of just 25 cents per cubic metre for beetle-attacked trees that are profitably turned to lumber, when there is evidence that the trees are worth much more.
- Pine remains the most commonly planted tree species following logging, thus setting the stage for future beetle outbreaks of potentially great severity.
- The beetle build-up is so great that the bugs are attacking trees less than half as old as the 80-year-plus trees they traditionally target.
- The presence of the beetles on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains near Chetwynd puts the bugs perilously close to the cross-country, northern boreal forest where they could attack jack pine, a common tree species in that forest.
- The provincial government continues to promote fire suppression at all costs, despite evidence that fires make our forests less vulnerable to widespread insect attacks.

In addition to noting these trends and their implications, this paper presents a more comprehensive and hopeful action plan than that endorsed by the province. It states that substantial increases in reforestation investments must be made now and that the province, in particular, should properly shoulder that responsibility — a responsibility it has shunned in recent years. The provincial government must also do much more to promote new research and management regimes that help to restore a greater diversity of tree species and tree ages to our Interior forests, as it is with diversity that we are better protected from the kinds of devastating events we are witnessing in our forests today.

Through an approach based on the three Rs of research, restoration and reforestation, the provincial government could go a long way to ensuring that the current forest health crisis is addressed meaningfully and that the actions taken today are of lasting social, economic and environmental benefit.

To do a proper job, the provincial government would have to firmly commit to the three Rs approach and — equally important — put in place the funding mechanisms and strengthened public service oversight required to ensure the job is done, and done right.

The report is divided into two distinct sections. The first outlines the broad elements of a three Rs response to the current crisis and discusses some of the ecological and economic benefits associated with creating more of a patchwork landscape in our Interior forests. Through logging, deliberate burning of some forests, conservation, replanting and tree tending efforts, the report shows how our Interior forests can be made more diverse and less vulnerable to sweeping insect attacks.

The second section focuses on ensuring that the public gets fair value from its forests and identifies the funding mechanisms that would allow the three Rs strategy to be implemented. A recurring theme in discussions about the future of forestry in BC is the need to make adequate investments in one of our most important natural resources, without which our still largely resource-dependent economy would founder. Having steadily withdrawn financial support for reforestation efforts on public forestlands, it is time the province committed adequate funds for much needed research, restoration and reforestation work.

The report concludes with 15 recommendations.

1. Given the sizeable area of forest that will be killed by beetles and not logged by the forest industry, the BC government should immediately fund an initial five-year reforestation and restoration program at an annual rate of \$100 million.
2. Once the provincial government commits to fund an initial five-year reforestation effort, it should immediately seek the federal government's participation, ideally on the basis of matching funding. Failure to secure federal funds should not, however, lessen provincial obligations.

3. Given the threats posed to resource-dependent communities by both the beetles and today's escalated logging activities, the BC government should immediately channel \$18 million per year for the next five years into intensive silviculture efforts in the Interior. This initial commitment should be in addition to the annual \$100 million reforestation investment recommended above.
4. The BC Forest Service should immediately hire additional staff in districts most directly affected by the outbreak. New personnel would form district forest health teams and have adequate fieldwork budgets. Each team would consist of people with research and field expertise in forest ecology, entomology, inventory, reforestation, climate modeling and ecosystem restoration. Their primary task would be to coordinate industry and government responses to pest outbreaks and other forest disturbances now and in the future.
5. As with the dramatic uplift in logging rates in response to the beetles, there should be a corresponding increase in the area ruled off limits to commercial logging.
6. The Forest Service should immediately initiate discussions with forestry firms and tree-planting companies to prioritize which areas of unlogged, beetle-attacked forest are most suited to replanting efforts, and which are not.
7. The Forest Service should work closely with climate scientists, forest geneticists and others to ensure that a wide range of planting strategies are employed and that they are carefully monitored over time. Such a diversity of approaches is critical if the aim is to create a patchwork landscape in our Interior forest that is more resilient to future insect infestations.
8. The Forest Service should work closely with forest companies to ensure that as much as possible clearcutting does not occur in mixed forests where beetle-attacked trees are interspersed among other tree species.
9. The Forest Service, in consultation with communities, the forest industry and other government agencies, should immediately initiate a comprehensive controlled-burning program.
10. With Interior logging rates temporarily increased by nearly 11 million cubic metres per year in response to the beetles, a stand-alone reforestation and restoration fund should be set up and all stumpage revenues derived from the temporary increase placed in it. As long as beetle-related logging increases remain in place, so should such a fund.
11. After consulting with Interior communities, the province should decide how such funds should be invested in reforestation or other related activities such as tree thinning, tree spacing and tree pruning, or some combination of both. These activities are vital if we are to have something of value to log in future generations.
12. The Ministry of Forests should immediately publish annual reports that clearly identify the additional volume of timber logged in response to the beetles, and the stumpage payments derived from it.
13. For stumpage fees, the province should:
 - scrap the nominal 25-cents-per-cubic-metre stumpage charge on dead and dry pine logs (many of which have been attacked by beetles and are subject to salvage logging);
 - immediately increase the stumpage fees on those logs and raise overall revenue targets accordingly;
 - channel the increased funds into the above-mentioned special account; and
 - base pricing on logical terms, with arbitrarily set stumpage rates replaced by a more appropriate pricing mechanism such as log yards or market-based pricing as currently practiced on the Coast.

14. The Forest Service should immediately hire additional staff to ensure that the increased number of logging trucks entering Interior mill yards are properly assessed in terms of the volume and value of their log loads.
15. The province should require Interior mills to provide annual reports to the Forest Service detailing how they utilize beetle-attacked logs entering their facilities and the selling price of end products, with these findings confirmed through periodic mill visits.

Collectively, these recommendations constitute an integrated and, more importantly, hopeful course of action than the plan put forward by the provincial government — one that if followed will help to restore a greater diversity to our Interior forests.

Diversity is the key element to any viable, long-term and ultimately sustainable forestry plan. By following such a course of action now, we begin to lay the foundation for healthier forests and a healthier forest economy for future generations.

More importantly, this report maintains that one of the best ways to fund an integrated package of reforms is by getting a higher dollar value now from our publicly-owned forests. If we can achieve that, and then reinvest that money where it is most needed, we can go a long way to ensuring that at least some of the windfall from today's logging boom is used to build a better tomorrow.