

Backgrounder on De-Centralizing Forest Management on Vancouver Island and Coastal BC

Decline of Forestry in Recent Years

The decline of the BC forest industry has been continuous, for at least the past generation. Between 1991 and 2018 the number of lumber mills contracted from 131 to 67, veneer and plywood mills from 20 to 12, pulp and paper mills from 36 to 20, and shake and shingle mills from 68 to 35, devastating rural communities across the province. During this same period, employment in forestry, including logging, manufacturing and support activities declined from roughly 97,000 to 50,000 workers.

As mills have closed their doors and thousands of middle class jobs have been lost, log exports mainly from Coastal BC have soared, from almost 800,000 cubic metres in 1991 to more than 5 million cubic metres in 2018 – with more than 3 million cubic metres to China, more than 1 million cubic metres to Japan, and more than 500,000 cubic metres to the USA. It is estimated that if these logs were processed in BC instead, more than 3,000 people in a given year could have been employed to manufacture those logs into lumber, pulp and paper, and value-added products.

At the same time, corporate ownership has become more and more concentrated. In BC, currently 10 corporations control more than two-thirds of the provincial timber supply. On Vancouver Island, two forest companies now hold approximately 5,800 hectares of private managed forest lands (nearly 20% of Vancouver Island's total land base). These lands were part of the E&N Railway Company land grants during the 1880s, which the Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group refer to as "[The Great Land Grab.](#)"

Our Governing Structure in British Columbia is the Problem

British Columbia is a province of great regions, very distinct regions. Our geography had made it so, and the people of the regions reconfirm it. There is a grandeur to it all, yet we have a dated colonial structure that fails to reflect our real strength and diversity. We come from early British colonies from the gold rush days, with a government located below the 49th parallel in beautiful, distant Victoria. Most of our civil servants and our Legislature are located in this southernmost outpost of Empire.

Is it not time to re-think all this?

Our regions... Vancouver Island, with its own environmental concerns, and insular nature; the South Central Interior with its grasslands, different culture and its own silence; the Kootenays, with their own deep history as part of an island empire; Prince George/Nechako and its own story; the Northwest, barely settled but with the diversity of Smithers, Terrace, Prince Rupert, Atlin and early cultures of the Nass and Haida Gwaii; the Peace River country, with its dry land farming and prairie links.

All of this magnificent land is governed from afar – be it absentee government or absentee corporations, and as a result we fail to achieve our full potential as the diverse society we are. Individuals far away, answering to people who have little to do with the region, accountable primarily to corporate or bureaucratic peers. These are the people in control of our regional destinies.

Step-by-step the people of the regions have been disempowered by absentee governments and corporations. A classic example of this decline in the regions is the decimation of the Forest Service in recent decades; consolidating administration farther and farther away and giving more and more authority to a corporate elite and distant bureaucracy. The results have been devastating for both the industry and the people of the regions.

In contrast, when local people are empowered, the difference is downright exciting. The Mission Tree Farm License in the Fraser Valley is a magnificent success story in our midst. These local folks were the first on the West Coast to propagate yellow cedar while at the same time building new relationships with school kids and farmers while generating revenue and jobs at home. Other excellent examples of community forests include the City of Revelstoke, Town of Creston and Municipality of North Cowichan.

Today there are nearly 60 community forest licenses held across B.C. that create 85% more employment per cubic metre than the industry average, while managing to a high environmental standard, as they widely employ partial cutting to address social, ecological and Indigenous values. Nearly half of these community forests are held by First Nations or in partnership with Indigenous communities.

To date, the most advanced evolution of macro-regional management occurred with the development of the Columbia Basin Trust, which shared the revenue of water resources in the Columbia River Basin. It has been an enormous success. The Columbia River is not only an asset of a Province hungry for electric power, but also an asset of the people who live there.

Greater involvement and co-operation at the local level seem to be the key for both building a prosperous economy, creating jobs, and in turn creating a happier citizen. The challenge is to turn this knowledge into policy and move in this direction province-wide.

Shifting Power to the Regions

The concept of regional empowerment is outlined in the paper [*Restoring Forestry in BC: The Story of the Industry's Decline and the Case for Regional Management*](#), authored by former B.C. Forests Minister Bob Williams, and published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) in January 2018.

Williams envisions a new planning process for forestry “coming up from the regions” which he suggests could initially be undertaken by creating new Regional Standing Committees of the B.C. Legislature, the members of whom would be MLAs elected from the respective regions. Each committee would fund the planning exercise in their region and then regional resource plans would be forwarded by the Regional Standing Committee for approval. It was, and is, a brilliant practical first step in reform.

Likely regions could include the Kootenays, Southern Interior, Northern Interior, Vancouver Island and the Coast. A finer-tuned pattern might identify the Okanagan and Lower Mainland as regions. These regions would have regional foresters, who, with local input, would report to the Regional Standing Committees of the Legislature and a Forester General (see below), providing a feedback loop that would empower people in the regions.

First Nations should play a central role in any new governance model with their non-Indigenous neighbours. “First Nations have borne the burden of decades of our misguided forest policies,” notes Williams. “Any credible change in direction must have First Nations at the forefront as we chart a new course.” As such, de-centralization of forestry governance could play an important role in furthering the principles of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

As part of the concept of regionalization, the CCPA paper recommends the creation of a Forest Charter passed by the B.C. Legislature that would include an overall vision, sustainability principles and standards for our forests. The concept of a Forest Charter dates back to England of 1217, when it was adopted as a companion document to *Magna Carta*, setting out principles for public access to Crown

land and for common stewardship of shared resources, in response to previous practices of the monarchy that had enjoyed a monopoly over all governance and distribution of resources.

The goals and principles of this new Forest Charter could include:

- Enhance the environment, sustainability, and climate resilience;
- Involve communities at the local level in planning, management and stewardship;
- Raise real incomes, provide fulfilling jobs;
- Create acceptable level of economic growth; and
- Improve equity and fairness.

Finally, Williams suggests appointing a Forester General, who would serve as a non-partisan and independent officer that would report annually to the Legislature and work with the regions of our province on local planning processes. The Forester General would monitor overall performance and promote continuous improvement in the quality, productivity, biodiversity and value of our forests.

Vancouver Island and Coastal BC as a Pilot Project

At the Union of BC Municipalities convention in 2019, delegates from across B.C. overwhelmingly [endorsed](#) a resolution calling on the Province to explore the feasibility of moving to a regional forest management model, creating a Forest Charter and appointing a Forester General ([Resolution B156](#)). North Cowichan has subsequently discussed the resolution with the Minister of Forests, Land and Natural Resources Operations, where there was clearly strong interest.

For AVICC 2021, the Municipality of North Cowichan is calling for the Province to pilot a regional governance model that would include AVICC members from the communities of Vancouver Island and the Coast, who are well-positioned to lay the groundwork for greater regionalization and local control.

AVICC members have shown leadership on forestry, and have previously endorsed resolutions from the Sunshine Coast Regional District on logging in the urban interface and coast forest revitalization, from the Cowichan Valley Regional District on regulating privately managed forest lands, from Powell River on amending the *Private Managed Forest Land Act*, and from the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District on log exports. Local governments and citizens from AVICC communities have been vocal in recent provincial consultations on forestry, including the [Private Managed Forest Lands Program review](#) (2019).

Historically, Vancouver Island has been at the forefront of land use planning at a macro-regional level. In 2000 the Province adopted the [Vancouver Island Land Use Plan](#), representing the first time that comprehensive land use planning had been done on a regional scale in B.C. The planning concluded years of public debate on land use issues related to forestry, employment and the environment.

Today AVICC communities are home to some of the most [successful community forests in BC](#), with many led in partnership with First Nations, including Alberni Valley, Bamfield-Huu-ay-aht, Barkley (Ucluelet), Cortes Island, Khowutzen (Cowichan Valley), Huu-ay-aht First Nation (Port Alberni), North Cowichan, North Island (Port McNeil), Powell River, Qala:yit F (Cowichan Lake and Pacheedat), Sunshine Coast, and Tla'amin (Powell River).