

## **Community Forests: Experiment in the Face of Change**

Climate change and cumulative forest practices are acting on the legacy of the province to alter the ecological relationships on which we have based our forest economy. This has been brought home to us forcefully through the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic and large scale interface fires of our recent experience. Widely reported science indicates that the future will bring more altered climate, more ecological disturbances, more fire, and more pests leading to accelerating changes across our landscapes. These changes will affect how ecological zones are expressed geographically, what tree species will persist to commercial rotation age, the status of water supplies and the quality of the environment for agriculture or recreation. While this ecological shakedown is occurring, we as a province are facing a rapidly shifting economic environment in which the products of our existing forest industry face competitors from Russia, South America, the European Union and China. It is a very complex world and it is changing rapidly.

The forest industry of British Columbia has developed to become a highly efficient producer of fibre commodities, largely for pulp and paper and structural wood for construction. Our major export success in the past and the drive to remain competitive in global markets is leading to larger economies of scale, automation, concentration of ownership and targeting of large scale consumers such as the US housing market, the Japanese housing market and the emerging super-consuming populations of China, India and Southeast Asia. The pulp industry is experiencing major threats to viability in competition, particularly with South America, even as they are briefly sustained by cheap beetle killed fibre. Accompanying this process, the historical requirement for industry to locate distributed conversion facilities in communities in the nearby supplying forest has been removed. This consolidation process, seen to be necessary in the large scale operations of major commodity exporting companies, is decreasing the direct economic tie between many rural communities and their surrounding forest resource base.

Community forests run counter to this large scale trend. Community Forest Pilot Agreements have increased in number as a counterbalancing part of the province's Forest Revitalization Plan. The forest allocations have generally been in close proximity to the communities, inside local viewscapes, watersheds, recreation areas or grazing lands.

In the early stages of community forest development, the rationale included providing for diversified economic activity along with understanding and local ownership of the forestry enterprise. The early rules for management of community forests stressed the recovery of timber values. To meet these rules, community forest managers had to meet timber cut targets, which in many cases could only be accomplished economically by making traditional supply arrangements with local industry mills and established logging firms. In some cases, meeting cut expectations would prove to be difficult, while also meeting more diverse community ideas about the benefits that should be coming from a community forest. The debate tended to focus on the economic viability of the timber supply allocated, with many proving to be too small to pay for the stewardship and management obligations expected from a timber company.

Lately the harvesting imperative has softened to allow for a wider set of forest uses, but we are a long way from treating the community forest as a forest, rather than a fibre supply.

What benefits could we derive from a forest that surrounds a rural community? The easy list is long and diverse enough:

- microclimate control
- visual amenity
- stable water supply
- commercial fibre supply
- specialty fibre for intensive value-added uses
- community pasture
- wildlife habitat
- biodiversity or old growth reserves
- recreation, both commercial and public – trails, resorts, swimming areas, beaches, camping areas, fishing, hunting, birdwatching...
- non-timber forest products
- traditional uses of plants for foods and medicines
- culturally important sites
- health recovery facilities
- cottage country

What about extending this list to new patterns of land and resource use?

- Ecological restoration of ecosystems damaged by beetles, wind, fire or other disturbances or need more attention following salvage operations
- Tailoring to provide for safer residential interface conditions
- Silviculture experiments to test for the viability of non-traditional reforestation in the face of impending climate change
- Ecological education and research plots for educational and research institutions
- Agroforestry trials leading to local marketing of products and increase in local self sufficiency of food supply
- Small scale biofuel trials
- Wind power or micro-hydro locations
- Therapeutic health or correctional facilities, retreat centres
- Social experiments with sustainable governance of common resources appurtenant to a community

If we were to treat community forests in the widest possible frame, how could we expect to make them economically viable. Let's consider an entirely different model from the allocation of a small, constrained timber supply that resembles a traditional forest industry tenure.

## **LAND GRANT FORESTS FOR COMMUNITIES**

### **The Land Grant System: Senator Justin Smith Morrill 1862**

The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 in the US provided grants, in the form of federal lands, and later funds, to each state for the establishment and maintenance of a public institution to fulfill a major social development mission: to teach agriculture, military tactics and the mechanic arts as well as classical studies so the members of the working classes could obtain a liberal, practical education. The acts provided 30,000 acres for each state representative and senator. Originally vetoed by President Buchanan in 1859 on the grounds of limiting federal interference in education, the act was passed for a second time by Congress and was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862.

A permanent funding allocation continues for the land grant colleges under the Nelson Amendment to the second Morrill Act. The land grant system included provision for establishing and funding agricultural experiment stations through a program created by the Hatch Act of 1887. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created a Cooperative Extension Service associated with each US Land Grant institution, providing ongoing funds for the extension service. The US Department of Agriculture administers the Smith-Lever funding, cooperating with State governments (which also provide funding for extension programs) to support the entire extension system.

In October 1994, the land grant model was extended to 29 tribal colleges through endowments totaling \$23 Million and the institutions were incorporated into the extension system network with commensurate funding.

The land grant model enabled development of a national network of colleges, many of which have matured into universities, providing both for democratization of educational opportunity and intimate engagement of learning institutions with the practical economies of their home regions. There are now 181 institutions, enrolling 2.9 million students, and an alumni of over 20 million.

### **What might a parallel model, based on land grant community forests, look like?**

For each rural, forest resource-based community of the province, including those primarily held by First Nations, provide an allocation of forested land and a financial endowment enabling the establishment of a “Community Forest” with the purpose of providing for economic diversification, land and resource stewardship and public education, leading to a permanent and sustained relationship between the people of the community and their surrounding forested commons.

Make the development of a community forest system in the province the joint responsibility of the relevant land, resource and educational ministries, providing for a lead agency through which accountability to the legislature would be ensured. Set standards for the ownership and governance of a community forest on which formal management duties and relationships with citizens would be based.

Establish eligibility criteria to define the appropriateness of land grants based on organizational integrity, economic necessity, land assembly potential and community enthusiasm for the enterprise. Base the land content of the grant on forested areas with multiple resource potential, not solely on the basis of commercially valuable timber supply or any other single value.

Link each community forest with a community college or university-college with a view to establishing educational and research programs that teach both diploma and degree students and members of the community at large about the ecosystems of the forest and the means of their sustainable use and ultimate conservation. Further link the community forests and the responsible colleges with regional or provincial university, government, model forest and industrial forest research programs designed to provide the scientific underpinning of sustainable forest management and the socio-economic models necessary to manage the human dimension.

Provide funding and organization to support a provincial association of community forests, as sponsors of an extension service designed to foster the continuing development of community forests and to share and apply the research information arising from the experience of all members.

Provide endowment and annual funding to support the work of the community forests and make the rules of engagement flexible enough to allow financial benefits derived from the community forests to be re-invested as well as to provide a share of proceeds to the crown. Provide that the basic land entitlement shall not be sold, but may be tenured in a variety of ways to enable development of revenue streams supportive of the fundamental purposes of the community forest.

### **Adapting the Model**

Could we consider creating “land grant communities” in which the community forest becomes a permanent asset of the rural community rather than a time-limited discretionary timber tenure? This would make them like the sustaining land grants to colleges in the US or the endowment lands for the University of British Columbia.

Guidelines could be established to set the stage for land grant forests. They could be owned by the elected local government. They could not be sold off nor public access be restricted except for safety or limited functional

reasons. Tenures for operations within the forest could be devised by the communities. They would be governed by a broad community process and report their deliberations, decisions, operations and accounts to the citizens. They could incorporate a wide variety of land and resource uses, providing that those uses were sustainable and did not degrade the fundamental ecosystem integrity of the land and water.

Rural communities could be invited to prepare proposals for land grant areas, expressing the comprehensive vision for the area that would launch the community's initial uses of the grant. Grants would be legislated, expandable and only rescinded under exceptional circumstances.

Development of the community land grant could be funded from many sources, some traditional and some innovative:

- sale of forest products derived from the area: as is currently the case
- Share of resource revenues derived from the region: as for the current FRO's offered to First Nations
- rental or tenuring of sustainable commercial uses compatible with the aims of the community forest
- sponsored restoration projects, research trials or educational uses: as for the "restoration contracts" now offered in the US
- grants in aid to local government for economic diversification, interface management or other such initiatives that support the development and renovation of community infrastructure: as for the current contracts/grants for interface fire work
- local taxation for specific ventures of broad public interest
- carbon credits, biodiversity credits or other such instruments recently arising in the financial marketplace
- energy recovery
- water treatment savings
- contracts for management of recreation sites, parks and ecological reserves in the immediate region

The current British Columbia arrangements for establishing, funding and governing community forests provides a base from which to develop a truly visionary system, unique in the world.

## **Now to Reality!**

OK, maybe the land grant idea might not fly by Monday! What could we do in the meantime to enhance the potential of community forests?

- Reduce the fibre recovery imperative, particularly during the time that MPB timber supplies have produced a glut in the market
- Reduce the tenure costs to allow earnings to be re-invested in the asset base of the community forest area
- Widen the range of productive uses of the forest estate that the CFPA's allow and provide for extended time scales for development of such uses; eg. Non-timber forest products
- Allow for development of community amenity that does not necessarily provide immediate financial benefits that can be taxed
- Lengthen the duration of the tenure to allow for longer term developments
- Pay the forest holders for a range of beetle recovery, interface management, ecosystem restoration, watershed management or other such infrastructure programs as governments may be supporting
- Focus funded silviculture experimentation in community forests and pay local stewards to maintain the security of experimental areas
- Fund a chair of community forest development at each of the provinces college and university faculties of forestry or resource management
- Charge a government ministry, or group of ministries as with the MPB initiatives, with the task of supporting the broad social and economic evolution of community forests
- Seek a portion of MPB recovery and of FIA funds and allocate them specifically for community forest development in areas affected by major disturbances
- Make explicit commitments for limitation of liability, particularly for the start-up years of a community forest operation

Whatever we do in the near future with the community forest, it should build ownership, stewardship and relationship – linking the people of rural communities with the land and water that sustains them.