

BETTER COMMUNITY CONTROL OVER FORESTS

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The Healthy Forests-Healthy Communities initiative is getting feedback from BC communities. Communities are concerned about the future of local forest landscapes. Communities want a viable and sustainable local forest economy and greater influence in forest land decisions.

To address these needs, the BC Government and forest corporations will seek a symptomatic treatment and possibly supply some new public involvement processes. There is no doubt that effective and meaningful involvement by communities in management of local forest landscapes could be a foundation for sustainable stewardship. A few new opportunities to review and comment on the intentions of central government and forest corporations will not provide meaningful involvement.

Most of BC's forests are Crown forests owned by the Province of BC. In the days of absolute monarchy, Crown lands would be chartered to feudal lords and formed the basis of feudal systems. The majority had little or no say. However, Canada and British Columbia are democracies and the appropriate role of the BC Government over the Crown forests is to act as trustee and see that the forests have wise management to sustain communities and a strong forest economy. This progressive view of Crown forest land was expressed in BC over 100 years ago by a Royal Commission on forests. The commission recommended that the Crown forests be retained in Crown ownership, supplied independent management by professional forest service with the intent of providing sustainable communities and a healthy forest industry. They noted that the priority of Government was to ensure that there was a wise system of forest stewardship through a progressive legal and institutional framework.

Given the enlightened early vision for BC's Crown forests, the last 100 years should have brought some devolution of control and management of forests to the local level. Unfortunately, the legal and institutional framework for Crown forest land has been regressive. The allocation of harvesting rights for most of BC's Crown timber to a few commodity forest products corporations restricted the diversification of the BC wood products industry and the administered prices made wood exports vulnerable to export tariffs and taxes. Improvident stripping of the best virgin timber led to major problems in the coastal forest industry. In the interior, improvident forest management led to the accumulation of huge areas of old Lodge Pole pine and set the stage for the loss of tens of billions of dollars worth of timber to beetle attack. independent professional forest management was compromised by passing more and more forest management responsibilities to forest corporations. BC Government administrations have developed a legal and institutional framework that has enabled forest corporations for more than 60 years. It can be said to be regressive because it is akin to that of an absolute monarch handing out the benefit of land to the feudal lord. The only difference is that the feudal lord has been replaced by a corporation. This is not progress. The feudal lord was a real person and there were some expectations of human decency. The corporation is a legal person constituted to make profit; not the best profile for the steward of the local forest landscape.

The legal and institutional framework for managing BC's Crown or public forests, involving corporate timber harvesting rights has become the established paradigm in BC. There is fear that any change will

have adverse economic effects. There have already been enough adverse economic effects that we should really fear failure to make major change. The legal and institutional framework has been headed in the direction of giving more control over public forests to corporations for over 60 years. We are at a tipping point and any moves toward stronger tenure by forest corporations will complete the slide toward enclosure of our Crown or public forests into the private interest. It is the inevitable destination under the present paradigm.

If BC communities are concerned about the future of local forest landscapes and their forest economy and want more control, they need to do more than ask our political decision makers for some more say in the present framework. BC communities need first to remind our politicians that the local forest landscape is our land. The rightful relationship of the community to the local forest is through an elected board that directs a local professional forest management staff that manages the forest landscape for the benefit of local communities.

The building block of a new framework would be the local forest trust. It would involve a sufficient area of local forest landscapes to form a viable economic forest enterprise. More than one community or rural area in the vicinity could be represented by a ward system on the elected board. The board and professional forest managers would operate under trust documents or a charter modeled on the international Montreal Process definition of sustainable forest management and conservation. The managers would develop a local forest economy that includes timber, non timber, and nature based economic activities. Delegation of forest management responsibility for anything greater than a family woodlot or stewardship license would not be permitted and timber would be sold on an open market.

A provincial institution would be required to audit, support and provide a court of appeal for decisions made by local forest trusts. A provincial forest trust assembly governed by an equal number of elected board and professional forest management delegates could fulfill this role. Major policy changes would require ratification by local forest trusts.

These new institutions also provide an innovative mechanism to resolve First Nation claims. First Nation's will be able to have local forest trusts or equitable representation through a ward system on local forest trusts. The Montreal Process provides for customary aboriginal use.

Forest dependent communities should seek direct control of the management of local forest landscapes under the new institutions of Local Forest Trusts and a BC Forest Trust assembly. This is a much more sustainable alternative than gaining a facade of more public involvement in the existing centralized government and corporate framework. It has been moving and will continue to follow a path of stealth privatization that will result in the enclosure of Crown forests into the private interest. Communities should grab the opportunity to ask for changes that will bring a sustainable future under their own control. The default alternative is debilitated industrial wood forests and probably gates restricting access to privatized local forest landscapes.