

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN FOREST MANAGEMENT

A Nested Approach

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British Columbia (BC) has legislative and policy instruments directed to providing the public with information on the management of Crown forests to meet identified objectives. There are three (3) main questions relative to strategic decision-making that contribute to building trust in forest management and awareness by communities and concerned citizens, specifically:

- 1) Is the public aware of proposed plans and activities?
- 2) Are the public expectations being met through implementation of plans and activities?
- 3) Is there adequate compliance and enforcement?

Building community and public confidence in forest manager decision-making would benefit from the nesting of instruments associated with answering each of these questions. The instruments have been developed separately to address these questions. Recently concerns have been raised by the public and independent bodies regarding their adequacy. This paper summarizes the actions needed to improve the existing instruments and build public confidence that long-term forest stewardship and management of BC forests is being attained.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE INSTRUMENTS

Traditionally forest policies and regulations deal with one instrument at a time. In the case of building public confidence in BC forest management, it requires assurance three (3) major tools collectively produce the desired results.

Public awareness of proposed plans and activities is directly associated with community engagement. As outlined in <https://tinyurl.com/ybvrijybb>, Government and industry should adopt a modified Community Engagement Framework (<https://tinyurl.com/y94tumvz>) that would address the current issue regarding inadequate public consultation. This would keep concerned citizens “in the loop” and provide an opportunity for input into plans and proposals relative to their local forests. The recommendations are:

- 1) Government modify the Framework document to:
 - a) Apply as a policy across all MFLNO operations, including BCTS,

- b) Encourage forest licensees to adopt it for their public communications, and
 - c) Include a comprehensive list of examples at each level related to forest management and land use.
- 2) Government apply the commitment “to actively seek and obtain First Nation, community and stakeholder response (views and options) before a decision is made by FLNR” to the decision regarding level of engagement prior to an initial decision based on:
 - a) Continual dialogue with the community and concerned citizens regarding plan development and proposed activities to avoid surprises, and
 - b) Community dialogue as a basis for establishing the level of engagement and improving communications and relations between forest managers and communities.
 - 3) Government rigorously apply the identified “Outreach Process” in the Framework to communicate the revised nature and application within MFLNRO and BCTS across the Province by:
 - a) Making forest managers and communities aware of it and the associated policy changes, and
 - b) Encouraging universal adoption by the forest sector.

Ensuring public confidence the proposed plans and activities will be followed in managing local forests is essential. The Professional Reliance concept model can provide this by building on the publically identified confidence in forest professionals. However, implementation of the model has come under criticism over the last few years. Modifications to its current application are required to meet public expectations as outlined in <https://tinyurl.com/ybe8fo7x>. The recommendations are:

- 1) Government, professional associations and industry jointly develop a coordinated communications strategy that includes communities and the public as target audiences for understanding Professional Reliance,
- 2) Simplify and clarify the description of Professional Reliance, the responsibilities of various parties and what Professional Reliance applies to and what it does not for public understanding,
- 3) Transfer, to Government, the requirement for forest professionals to make judgement decisions where competing public interests occur, and
- 4) Implement the recent Government commitment to “modernize land use plans” such that they will provide guidance to forest professionals regarding land allocation and management expectations.

The **Compliance and Enforcement** staffing and regulatory changes instituted under the Forest and Range Practices Act (FRPA) resulted in a significant reduction in oversight of the management practices in BC forests, over the last decade. Government has relied on a poorly implemented Professional Reliance model as noted above. Improvements to the current Compliance and Enforcement program (<https://tinyurl.com/y97qeb22>) are required to complement Professional Reliance results and build public confidence appropriate practices are being implemented. It should be noted that the Forest Practices Board is an additional independent auditor of performance relative to meeting the FRPA requirements but limited by their mandate.

The recommendations regarding modifying the Compliance and Enforcement program are:

- 1) Return Compliance and Enforcement staffing to 2005 levels,
- 2) Ensure Compliance and Enforcement staff responsibilities are prioritized to meet the needs of public expectations of forest management oversight,
- 3) Ensure results of Compliance and Enforcement audits are readily available to the public in a form understandable to laypersons, and
- 4) Integrate Compliance and Enforcement with Professional Reliance and community engagement as a package to build public trust in BC forest management.

SUMMARY

Building confidence in BC forest management requires addressing three (3) questions:

- 1) Is the public aware of proposed plans and activities?
- 2) Are the public expectations being met through implementation of plans and activities?
- 3) Is there adequate compliance and enforcement?

A “yes” answer to each will require implementing the recommendations in the noted papers on each of the relevant topics. It is a “nested” package. Failure to address one of the components will weaken the argument public confidence has been achieved. Hopefully, Government and the forest industry will make the necessary changes, including increasing transparency of results, so interested parties can assess whether BC forests are managed to meet public expectations over the long-term and have an opportunity for input throughout the process.