

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN FOREST MANAGEMENT

Community Consultation

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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 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 integrating instruments associated with answering each of these questions. The instruments exist to address these questions but recently, there have been concerns raised by the public and independent bodies regarding their adequacy. This paper addresses the first area with an emphasis on community consultation.

ISSUE

The adequacy of public consultation on various forest management plans and activities has been inconsistent across the Province and resulted in criticisms by concerned citizens and communities.

BACKGROUND

The concern by communities of being poorly informed and not having influence on forest management decision-making has been identified since 2010 in the passing of resolutions at the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) AGM's. This has continued with culmination in a resolution passed at the AGM in September 2016 based on a member survey (<https://tinyurl.com/y9wsyefc>) where 85% of respondents identified concern over an inadequate level of engagement. Government responded to this last resolution by creating a dialogue with communities regarding the issue. To date, little progress seems to have been achieved base on the lack of public announcements but dialogue continues.

The prominence of the issue has resulted in some of the forest industry increasing consultations with communities (e.g., *Forestry Friendly Communities* (<https://forestryfriendly.ca/>) on Vancouver Island).

Companies continue to conduct public consultation according to the legal requirements. In many instances communities and concerned citizens are not aware of the opportunities for providing input.

In review of guidance documents for Government engagement and consultation we find two that are of most importance:

- 1) *A modern community engagement framework*¹ produced in 2013 by MFLNRO in response to the mid-term timber supply issue.
- 2) *Public Involvement in Forest Management Planning in BC*² by the Forest Practices Board (FPB) describing the public communications responsibilities of Government and Licensees

Although these two documents are not specific to increasing community awareness of forest management plans and activities, they provide base information that, if modified and adopted as policy, would improve the situation.

A MODERN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The *modern community engagement framework* “... document is intended to describe a new framework for the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (MFLNRO) to engage communities on natural resource issues and decisions. A modern engagement framework objective is to help in timely and better-informed ministry decisions by strengthening existing engagement processes with First Nations, communities and stakeholders. An effective engagement framework must be flexible in order to address a broad spectrum of topics and local circumstances.”

Public Engagement Levels

The framework has four (4) levels of public engagement. Each is briefly outlined below.

Level 1 – Sharing information

To share with First Nations, community and stakeholders accurate, timely, relevant and easy to understand information (e.g. about implementation decisions regarding MFLNRO Mid-Term Timber Supply [MTTS] Action Plan). This level is the most basic form of community engagement. On its own it offers no further involvement. However, it is the foundation for successive levels of engagement to occur. Information assists the community in understanding issues, alternatives, and/or possible solutions, and increases their capacity to effectively contribute in successive levels of engagement.

¹ MFLNRO, *A modern community engagement framework*, April 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/y94tumvz>

² FPB Board Bulletin, Volume 15 *Public Involvement in Forest Management Planning in BC*, July 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/y8un2pad>

Level 2 – Consultation

To actively seek and obtain First Nation, community and stakeholder response (views and options) before a decision is made by MFLNRO. MFLNRO will consider communities' views as one important source of input that helps inform the final decision. MFLNRO will report back on how community feedback is used in the decision-making process.

Level 3 – Planning together

To collaborate or partner with First Nations, communities and stakeholders in identifying or analyzing issues, developing alternatives and identifying preferred solutions. For example, if level 2 consultations associated with the MTTs Action Plan indicate there is an informed need for changing land use plans, resource management objectives and/or sensitive areas and if there is general support to proceed to a process to revise, MFLNRO could initiate a specified process using level 3.

Level 4 – Acting together

To collaborate or partner with First Nations, the community and stakeholders in implementing the preferred solution. For example, if a level 3 process was initiated to support delivery of the MTTs Action Plan, and changes were recommended and accepted regarding sensitive areas, that process could move to a level 4 to support implementation of those decisions.

Overall the Framework appears to be sound but deficient in some areas of application. The unfortunate part of this framework is the unilateral Government retention of the decision regarding the level of engagement decision without consultation, especially at level 1. Although there are examples provided, there is no assurance each situation will be consistently evaluated by MFLNRO. This improvement could be easily corrected through providing more real examples and an opportunity for a community or concerned citizen an opportunity for input into the level being considered.

Implementation

The Framework includes a number of Guiding Principles. Unfortunately, it does not appear these are being used to the extent anticipated.

An ad hoc survey of Government staff identified little knowledge of the Framework document. This may be due to the focus being on a specific issue (i.e., MTTs) and more specifically the Burns Lake area. Consequently, a good, basic document has not been used widely.

There are many instances where Licensees are criticized for lack of or inadequate community consultation. This Framework, if modified as above, would be useful to companies in communicating their responsibilities. If this was to be adopted, it would improve communications and relations between forest managers and communities/public and provide consistency in communications.

Communication responsibilities reside with Government, industry, communities and individuals interested in the management of their local forests. All have to understand the Framework and the opportunities or requirements. The public cannot put all the blame on industry or Government. They need to become informed and aware of input opportunities. These have been outlined not only in the FPB Bulletin Volume 15 but in the HFHC document *Community influence on forest management decision-making* (<https://tinyurl.com/yd8zoqpt>).

The current Framework includes a commitment for it to “...be considered a ‘living document’ that would get revised as needed based on experience and use. Revisions would be made in an orderly manner to reduce confusion, and clearly labeled and dated (e.g., v.1, v.2)”. Now is the time to update it and expand its use across the Ministry and forest sector.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The following recommended actions are based on Government adopting the Framework for application across the province as a “living document” that:

- Guides actions toward achieving the objectives in the Framework,
- Addresses the current issue of inadequacy of public consultation on various forest management plans and activities, and
- Contributes to the commitment of Government being open and transparent.

It is recommended:

- 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.