

LOCAL FOREST STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING

Community Influence

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Healthy Forests-Healthy Communities: A conversation on BC forests

OBJECTIVE

To inform Municipal/Regional Governments and communities of the opportunities to influence land use and strategic management decisions regarding local forest lands

BACKGROUND

Throughout the world, including Canada and British Columbia (BC) people are asking for more democracy in decisions that affect their lives. BC forest dependent communities are strongly influenced by the management of local forest lands which, in turn are critical for the continued support for local families, businesses and communities. Therefore, Municipal/Regional Governments and communities are entitled to have a say in land use and forest management. A mechanism is needed to provide meaningful community engagement on a continuous basis with decision-makers regarding their views, concerns and current and future needs.

The *Healthy Forests-Healthy Communities: A conversation on BC forests* (HFHC)¹ dialogue that occurred from January 2011 to May 2013 identified a number of recommendations related to the sustainability and use of the BC forest asset. One of these was to increase community influence on local forest lands decisions at the strategic level.²

The 2011-2012 BC Government Employees Union (BCGEU) community dialogue on forests, *BC Forests in Crisis*³, identified the community issue that they “feel they have little voice in local forest matters.”

The 2008 *Reversing the Tide* conference in Prince George identified best practices across North America in rural development and economic revitalization requires active involvement of communities in designing solutions to their issues.

¹ A non-partisan, volunteer supported initiative to provide an opportunity for communities and concerned citizens to inform decision-makers of their views and concerns regarding the management of BC forest lands

² *Restoring BC's Forest legacy and energizing the forest sector, Final report, 2013*, <http://bcforestconversation.com>

³ http://www.bcgau.ca/sites/default/files/BC_Forests_In_Crisis_report_lo_0.pdf

These reports and anecdotal comments on local forest lands issues suggest communities must be more involved in strategic level decisions. One component of achieving this overall goal is to arm communities and concerned citizens with information regarding the mechanisms and actions currently available to them to influence decisions.

Forest companies have been involved with forest certification since the mid-1990s. There are three (3) main certification systems in use within BC⁴. All of these require input into forest management practices from the various community interests within the technical aspects of Sustainable Forest Management. However, the advice does not include the over arching issue of what the community wants from their local forests and frequently does not include representation from local government. The generally held assumption within the certification process is the objectives are those of the Province and companies with the main contribution to the community being creation of jobs. Currently, the focus of forest company decisions is delivering corporate objectives and meeting Provincial resource management and revenue goals. The HFHC dialogue clearly identified communities are asking for forest lands decisions to not just create jobs but contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of their community. Decision-making process structures to ensure consideration of this objective are critical.

Forest dependent communities have an opportunity to take a leadership role in designing the future of BC forest lands! During the HFHC dialogue, it was not uncommon for members of Municipal Governments to make the comment that they have little or no influence on strategic decisions relative to the management of local forests. It was their view the issue is “outside their mandate and forest companies go to Victoria, sit down with Government, make the decisions and we have to live with the results.” It is my view Municipal Governments have influence both within their mandates and access to existing instruments (e.g., forest certification processes). However, to utilize these avenues the Municipal Government has to create infrastructure mechanisms, guidance documents and partnerships to demonstrate to the Provincial Government and forest companies they “have their act together on this issue.”

Municipal Governments and communities can influence strategic decisions regarding local forest lands by capitalizing on the critical need for corporations and politicians to demonstrate they have the social license for their actions related to forest resources. This involves more than Municipal Governments reacting to Government or industry proposed plans. It is being proactive and identifying what they want from the local forests for their communities. Providing leadership regarding management and use of local forest lands can be accomplished by:

⁴ Canadian Standards Association - <http://www.csasfmforests.ca/> ; Sustainable Forestry Initiative - <http://www.sfiprogram.org/> ; Forest Stewardship Council - <https://ca.fsc.org/>

- 1) Establishing a local mechanism (e.g., multi-stakeholder advisory committee) within the Municipal Government to identify and focus on local priority forestry related issues related to long-term forest lands stewardship
- 2) Developing a community vision and goals for the local forest lands that respects the community's economic, environmental and social values
- 3) Informing local forest managers of the community vision and goals for the local forest lands
- 4) Building partnerships with forest managers (e.g., companies, BCTS, Community Forests, Woodlot Licensees, First Nations Woodlands Licensees) to work collaboratively in strategic forest lands decision-making
- 5) Encouraging forest managers to assist in enhancing community economic diversification through their operating decisions
- 6) Requiring local forest managers to demonstrate how proposed plans and actions will contribute to achieving the community vision and goals
- 7) Participating in third party forest certification processes related to the management of local forest lands
- 8) Influencing third party certification by ensuring: 1) performance standards meet community needs, 2) community concerns are a priority for certification audits and 3) Municipal Government provides input into certification audits
- 9) Informing forest company customers of significant concerns, if any, regarding forest management actions contributing to the community vision and goals for the local forest lands
- 10) Informing the community regarding forests lands issues and progress in achieving the vision and goals

Sustainable forest management is an essential component of a sustainable community. Creating Municipal Government mechanisms to effectively engage in local forest lands decision-making is not new as examples exist (e.g., District of Clearwater, Strathcona Regional District, Northern Rockies Regional Municipality, Omenica Beetle Action Coalition). This does not involve a “cookie cutter” approach and requires flexibility to meet the intent to generate community influence while accommodating local conditions. The expectation is the actions will be conducted by local residents and the Municipal Government as part of the local government infrastructure. Having said this, it may be advisable to have someone familiar with this process and its parts provide guidance in its development. Specialists should be retained to help with some actions such as facilitating the development of a community vision and goals for local forest lands and the understanding of the forest certification process.