

## **JOB LOSS AND IMPACT ON FAMILIES**

### **Bill Bourgeois' Opinion**

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Mill closures and job loss has been in the news recently. The view by many is we are in a transition from the current forest sector model to a new model yet to be determined and we will just have to ride it out as it develops over the next several years. **I believe this is a cop out!** People losing their job and its effect on the family is not something to take lightly.

The loss of jobs is not just the impact on the individual but their families and those families indirectly associated with the jobs. It has been reported that over 800 jobs have been lost recently with a multiplier effect of an additional at least 2000 families impacted and more to come. It is easy for people who are not directly affected to brush over the impacts or activists who say Government and/or industry should have done something earlier as we told them. We need to work hard to adjust to the situation and minimize these impacts.

My experience in terminating or laying people off due to conditions outside their control is dramatic, both for the person doing the deed and the individuals. It is easy to say "it is beyond your control." However, the night before inviting 12 people individually into my office to tell them they would no longer have a job, it became stressful when I realized that it is not just the employees being impacted but their families. The situation forces you to second guess yourself; did I make the right decision; what could I have done to prevent or minimize this action; how can I minimize the impact, etc.? After this experience, I said to myself I would do my best to change the Department operation to minimize or prevent this from happening again.

Another of my experiences was related to the Cariboo-Chilcotin Regional Land Use Plan. CORE (Commission on Resources and Environment) produced a plan that would result in an estimated 500 jobs being lost from the current forest sector. It was justified by an increase of 500 jobs in new forest related businesses. When I informed CORE these were not the same families and it did not need to happen anyway, the advice was rejected. The CORE response was "it was the right thing to do and the future will demonstrate it was the right decision." Fortunately, the key sectors in the region came together and worked collaboratively to create their own regional land use plan that did not result in loss of jobs while protecting environmental and other values. Yes, it was not perfect but it worked until the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic came along and the subsequent wildfires.

The point is, Government, industry, communities and forest professionals have the responsibility to the forest sector families to work hard to find solutions that minimize or eliminate job loss. Political rhetoric and idealistic activism are not a solution. These statements just add to the stress of the families directly involved. This is time for support, compassion and action, not just putting the blame on others or waiting until things sort themselves out.

Politicians keep talking about assisting those who have lost their job in transitioning to other jobs, mainly outside the forest sector<sup>1</sup>. This is very important but a mitigation action and not the necessary adaptation required to build sustainability. A strategic approach to community diversification is required<sup>2</sup>. The responsibility to find ways to minimize the impact of a forest sector transition resides with Government, forest companies (small and large), communities and forest and economic professionals. We need to go beyond the immediate financial assistance, skills training and job re-location assistance. We need to deal with the barriers associated with issues preventing moving forward to a new forest sector. This begins with a vision for the new forest sector both at the Provincial and local levels<sup>3</sup>.

Government is holding stakeholder consultation sessions to obtain input regarding what is concerning people relative to the forest sector and management of the forest<sup>4</sup>. There is no stated Government vision<sup>5</sup> but one could be developed using the following five (5) goals stated by Minister Donaldson<sup>6</sup>:

- Rebuilding solid wood and secondary industries,
- Improving harvest performance to ensure more fibre is available for domestic mills,
- Fostering stronger business-to-business relationships,
- Maintaining a credible auction system, and
- Restoring public confidence and improving the social contract.

One can only assume Government is thinking that gathering the input will guide decision-making regarding the necessary changes. This Input may be useful but without a clear vision lends itself to political decision-making which is usually short-term, fragmented and not necessarily a path to sustainability, community resiliency and long-term forest stewardship. Frequently input using this model tends to be either not well thought out, too special interest focused or too general for effective use.

Many of the current priority issues associated with the forest sector and forest management have been recognized and communicated for some time<sup>7</sup>. Addressing these separately but with the guidance of the Provincial and local forest and manufacturing visions forces participants to focus and be specific as to how to resolve them. I believe this is a more productive and analytical approach than general stakeholder consultations recognizing it may not be from a political perspective.

I know politics is and always has been involved in decisions around BC forests. However, we need to move beyond this and follow Simon Fraser University professor and labour historian, Dr. Mark Leier's statement that *"Governments do not do things because it is the right thing to do. They do the right thing when they*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/5394991/bc-forestry-job-losses-canfor/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/y9v3opkh>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bcforestconversation.com/wp-content/uploads/Moving-toward-community-resiliency-specific-actions.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/forestry/coast-forest-sector-revitalization/coast\\_forest\\_sector\\_revitalization\\_web.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/forestry/coast-forest-sector-revitalization/coast_forest_sector_revitalization_web.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bcforestconversation.com/a-common-forest-sector-vision-for-bc/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/forestry/coast-forest-sector-revitalization/coast\\_forest\\_sector\\_revitalization\\_web.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/forestry/coast-forest-sector-revitalization/coast_forest_sector_revitalization_web.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bcforestconversation.com/stewardship/priority-actions/>

*are pushed and pressured to do them.”* We need to provide input that can be used to “push” Government to do things that will achieve generally acceptable Provincial and local community forest and manufacturing visions and bring job sustainability to forest sector workers.

One model we need to use is to bring together knowledgeable, innovative and committed individuals familiar with an issue in a collaborative dialogue format to develop actions to remove barriers and promote forest sector investment in local communities. This can then be used as input into legislative and policy development by decision-makers to provide security for current and future workers. It is hard work, but the rewards are great and necessary. Some examples of issues that could be either resolved or moved forward immediately are:

- Developing community vision statements for their local forest and forest manufacturing sector to guide decision-making<sup>8</sup>.
- Removing barriers to full utilization of logging residue and encourage mill and facility investments<sup>9</sup>.
- Identifying opportunities and actions to remove barriers regarding the building of regional secondary wood manufacturing clusters<sup>10</sup>.

I know this will not save the jobs associated with the current mill closures but it is a plan to address near-future job retention. We owe it to the forest workers and communities to take direct action rather than just broadly consulting.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bcforestconversation.com/wp-content/uploads/Moving-toward-community-resiliency-specific-actions.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bcforestconversation.com/full-utilization-fibre-burns-lake-cluster/>

<sup>10</sup> An industry cluster is a group of firms and institutions located in close proximity whose businesses are interlinked through value and supply chains, labor, and use of similar inputs, technology, and complementary products. Reference: The status of and opportunities for business clustering within the forest products sector in the US, US Endowment for Forestry and Communities, 2009, 27p.