

Axed: A Decade of Cuts to BC's Forest Service

KEY FINDINGS

British Columbia's Forest Service is fast approaching its 100th anniversary, a milestone to be celebrated in 2012. But current and former Forest Service employees are wondering, both publicly and in private, what will exist of the venerable institution by then.

This report examines the events that have led to the crisis of confidence among the men and women tasked with looking after BC's forests. In less than one decade, BC's Forest Service has lost 1,006 positions, or roughly one quarter of its workforce. With the losses, the ability of public servants to oversee BC's forests has become hopelessly compromised. For example, today in northeast BC the average area of land overseen by one Forest Service employee is 232,240 hectares, while the comparable figure for one US Forest Service employee is 2,666 hectares.

The sheer area of ground to be covered and the lack of personnel to effectively cover it mean that British Columbians are at grave risk of losing their collective eyes and ears on the ground. Between 2001/2002 and 2004/2005, field inspections by Forest Service compliance and enforcement staff fell by 46 per cent, opening the door to a range of potential abuses, including illegal logging and log theft, unmarked logs and therefore unpaid provincial stumpage fees, and environmentally destructive logging operations. The recent loss of 22 more compliance and enforcement personnel will further increase the risk of such abuses.

In addition to dramatic cuts to personnel and budgets, the Forest Service has recently been cleaved in two with the creation of the Ministry of Natural Resource Operations in October 2010. The new ministry has absorbed personnel from the old provincial forests, environment, agriculture, and energy and mines ministries. The restructuring is almost certain to decrease Forest Service presence and effectiveness on the ground.

This report concludes with a call for the appointment of a provincial commission of inquiry into whether a vastly diminished Forest Service and dramatically reorganized provincial cabinet is capable of addressing the immense challenges that lie ahead in managing BC's publicly owned forests. Until this commission has completed its investigation, there should be no further cuts to Forest Service staff and a halt to the restructuring brought on by the creation of the new ministry.

by Ben Parfitt

DECEMBER 2010



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The most recent cuts to BC's Forest Service have come at the worst possible of times: an era of insect attacks that have killed hundreds of millions of trees, forest fires of increasing number and severity, an unimaginable reforestation challenge, and a pressing need to respond to climate change.

For the past decade a steady retreat from British Columbia's resource-rich hinterland has been underway, one with negative implications for the sound stewardship of the province's natural resources.

In bunches, as opposed to one-by-one, the provincial government has eliminated or severely reduced staffing at local offices housing some of the best minds in forest and environmental sciences. With the closures, vital public services have been lost or relegated to distant communities. The outcome is that the connection between public servants and the public they serve is far more tenuous, and at the worst possible of times: an era of unprecedented insect attacks that have killed hundreds of millions of trees; forest fires of increasing number and severity; a reforestation challenge of unimaginable extent and complexity; and a pressing need both globally and at home to respond to these and other climate change-related events in ways that conserve forests both to protect biological diversity and to provide society with wood products.

Recently, the connection has become even more tenuous. On October 25, 2010, BC Premier Gordon Campbell announced the creation of a new ministry. In a sweeping change affecting the ministries of energy and mines, agriculture, environment and forests, a new ministry known as Natural Resource Operations was added to the mix. The new ministry did not replace the other ministries so much as it assumed several of the more "operational" functions of each of them.¹

In practical terms this meant that what remained of the old Ministry of Forests and Range (now Forests, Mines and Lands) was a rump of its former self. Its remaining staff (as of this writing undetermined) retained responsibility for policy in a number of key areas including forest stewardship, forest pests and diseases, forest roads and bridges. And staff continued to be responsible for critically important things such as conducting forest inventories (counting trees), tree improvement (generally achieved through selecting seed and tree orchards), pricing timber and selling a limited amount of Crown timber through auction.

But where it counts most—on the ground—authority to approve forest stewardship plans (plans that lay out in a general way where companies intended to log), or to approve actual logging plans, or to embark on "restoration" activities on public forestlands, or to monitor and enforce forest company activities, is now in the hands of the new ministry.



This dramatic change was not the first time an attempt had been made to separate out functions from the various “dirt” ministries and centralize them in a new entity. In 2001, for example, a new Ministry of Sustainable Natural Resource Management (MSRM) was unveiled, and several functions of the Forests Ministry and Environment Ministry were transferred over to it. But instead of eliminating the so-called “red tape” that was allegedly bogging down resource industries, the move seemed to increase it. The old adage that Humpty Dumpty couldn’t be put together again, though, proved true. Four years later when MSRM was disbanded, its workforce was reabsorbed into various ministries. But in the interim, both MSRM and other ministries, including the Ministry of Forests, had lost significant numbers of personnel. By the time the dust settled, the Ministry of Forests or Forest Service² was down about 800 full-time positions after the short-lived MSRM experiment was declared a failure.

If Humpty Dumpty was broken then, he’s even more broken now. And yet, the arguments are persuasive that now more than ever is the time for a strong, reinvigorated Forest Service that:

- Manages forests to maximize carbon storage and combat climate change;
- Protects the full range of plant and animal life in our forests so they have the best opportunity to adapt in response to climate change;
- Squarely addresses the reforestation challenge before us, without which we risk going backward as opposed to forward in our efforts to use forests to sequester atmospheric carbon;
- Works with communities to reduce the risks of severe forest fires;
- Ensures that the forest industry meets its obligations to grow the next generation of trees, trees that are the cornerstone of today’s and tomorrow’s forest economy and that remain the economic lifeblood of many communities; and
- Guarantees that the public gets fair value for its forest resources.

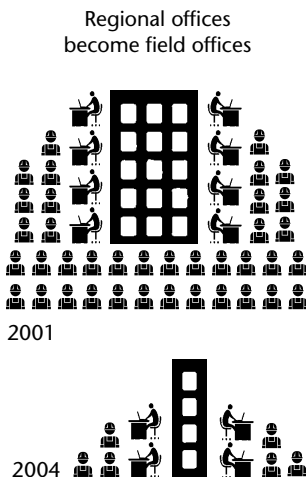
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This report sheds light on the extent of recent cutbacks to the Ministry of Forests, Mines and Lands, or Forest Service. Using provincial government data, information from the BC Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU) and the Professional Employees Association, and interviews with former and present public servants, the report focuses on what the impacts of recent job losses have been—both to specific communities and to the protection of BC's public forests.

As always, context is necessary to assess the impact of recent job losses. What occurred in the past bears on the present and future.

THE LIGHTS DIM: CUTS TO THE FOREST SERVICE 2001 TO 2004

More than one quarter of all Forest District offices (11 of 42) were turned from full-service operations to minimally staffed field offices.



Where once up to 70 people and commonly 50 people were employed, 10 people or fewer remained.

Between 2001 and 2004, 800 people working for the Forest Service either left their positions and were not replaced, or were let go. Four fifths of those losses—647 positions—occurred in rural communities, the remainder in Victoria, where the headquarters of the ministry's major departments and programs—revenue, research, inventory, forest health, silviculture, reforestation, compliance and enforcement, and scaling—are located.³

While Victoria experienced the largest Forest Service cuts of any community, the job losses were nowhere near as deeply felt as they were in the numerous (55) rural communities to weather public sector job losses. The provincial capital's large population, diversified economy and minimal reliance on the forest industry blunted the economic impact of the job losses in a way that smaller communities—whose economies were more closely linked to the forest industry—could not.

The provincial government also used the job cutting and budget paring exercise to initiate far-reaching changes to the infrastructure of Forest Service offices—one that for decades was built around a network of community-based operations.

A radical reorganization was implemented whereby slightly more than one quarter of all Forest District offices (11 of 42) were turned from full-service operations to minimally staffed field offices. Where once up to 70 people and commonly 50 people were employed, 10 people or fewer remained. The gutting of district offices was most keenly felt in the communities of Grand Forks, Fort St. John, Horsefly/Likely, Invermere, Lillooet, Kispiox/Hazelton, Bella Coola, Moricetown/Houston, Penticton, McBride and Salmon Arm.

Such dramatic changes were preceded by a reorganization that halved the number of regional headquarters that oversaw district operations. Gone were regional headquarters in Vancouver, Smithers and Nelson. Left was one regional headquarters for the entire BC coast, based out of Nanaimo; one regional headquarters for the northern half of BC's Interior based out of Prince George; and one regional headquarters in Kamloops to oversee the southern Interior.

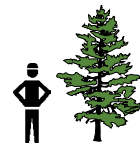
To appreciate what this means, it helps to reflect on the sheer size and diversity of the province and the enormity of its forested estate. First, with the exception of the 6 per cent of provincial lands that are privately owned, virtually all of BC is Crown land and under provincial jurisdiction. While this will undoubtedly change as the provincial and federal governments conclude new treaties with First Nations and/or the province enters into new co-management arrangements with individual First Nations, a strong provincial

government role in managing Crown resources will remain. This responsibility will likely extend to much of the roughly 60 million hectares of forest in one of North America's most biologically diverse landscapes. By comparison, in the entire continental United States the amount of forest managed by the US Forest Service is about 80 million hectares.

When lights go out or are dimmed in Forest Service offices in BC, more than the buildings themselves are thrown into shadow. So too are wide swaths of land where people and communities are in the dark about what is truly going on.

Take, for example, BC's sprawling Peace River and Northern Rockies regional districts. Together, these two regions cover 204,946 square kilometers of land, making them more than six times the size of Vancouver Island. Today, there are two district offices left in northeastern BC—one in Dawson Creek and one in distant Fort Nelson (there used to be a third one in Fort St. John, which in 2000 employed a staff of 70). There is also one BC Timber Sales office that auctions Crown timber. Between all three offices today there are 87 employees. Less than a decade ago, the communities of Dawson Creek, Fort St. John and Fort Nelson had a combined 159 Forest Service staff.

In the United States, if the 80 million hectares of land under US Forest Service jurisdiction is divided by the service's 30,000 employees, it works out to one USFS staff person for every 2,666 hectares of land. In northeast BC the comparable figure is now one Forest Service staff person for every 232,240 hectares.



The United States Forest Service has one staff person for every 2,666 hectares.

In northeastern BC, the Forest Service has one staff person for every 232,240 hectares.



THE LIGHTS DIM FURTHER: RECENT FOREST SERVICE JOB LOSSES

On April 4, 2010, Deputy Minister of Forests Dana Hayden issued a memo detailing the elimination of another 204 Forest Service staff.⁴ The announcement would serve to dim the lights in several more Forest Service offices.

Four more full-service offices in Squamish, Revelstoke, Clearwater and Vanderhoof were reduced to sub-offices, meaning that key decisions on compliance and enforcement and approval of forest industry logging plans were transferred to the closest remaining Forest District offices. Another two Forest District offices in Alexis Creek and Castlegar became small field office operations, and the field office in Prince Rupert was closed in its entirety.

A subsequent announcement pushed the total number of layoffs to 245 positions. When these job losses and previous job losses are combined, and when the hiring of new people and retirement of Forest Service staff between the two rounds of job cutbacks is considered, staffing levels between 2001 and 2010 fell by 1,006 positions, a decline of 25 per cent.⁵

The job losses also played out against a backdrop of substantial cuts to the overall Ministry of Forests and Range (MOF) budget. In February 2009, BC's Finance Minister presented a revised MOF budget of \$770 million for 2008/09.⁶ One year later in its budget estimates for 2010/11, the province reported that the upcoming MOF budget would be \$641 million, marking a 17 per cent decline. But the effective decline is much greater. That is because in June 2009 the ministry assumed responsibility for the province's Integrated Land Management Bureau or ILMB.⁷ Previously, the ILMB was housed within the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands.

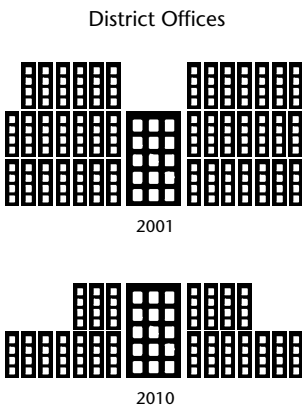


If the ILMB portion of the budget is removed, the actual Forest Service budget for 2010/11 is \$591 million,⁸ meaning the gap between the 2008/09 and 2010/11 budgets widens to \$179 million. Of this 23 per cent decline, most is pared from the operating and capital budgets, meaning fewer funded programs and fewer staff in the field.⁹

WHAT IS LOST, WHERE?

While 38 communities in total lost Forest Service positions, the job losses were disproportionately weighted to Victoria (24 per cent of the total) and the three regional offices in Kamloops, Prince George and Nanaimo (21 per cent). Layoffs in seven other communities accounted for another 24 per cent of the jobs lost. A calculation of percentage job declines within individual Forest Service offices was beyond the scope of this report. But it is reasonable to conclude that in some instances—Prince Rupert being the most severe example, with all positions eliminated—the declines were extremely high.

In 2001, there were 42 district offices across the province; by 2010, just 21. Those working in the field must now travel great distances – sometimes hundreds of kilometres – to reach the closest office



Forest Service Cuts by Community 2009–2010		
Community	Jobs Lost	Percentage
Victoria	58	24%
Kamloops	25	10%
Prince George	17	7%
Castlegar	12	5%
Prince Rupert	11	4%
Alexis Creek	11	4%
Nanaimo	10	4%
Squamish	7	3%
Williams Lake	6	2%
Vanderhoof	6	2%
Burns Lake	6	2%
27 other BC communities	76	31%
TOTAL	245	100%

Source: Derived from data supplied by the BC Government and Service Employees Union and the Professional Employees Association

In terms of job losses in specific Forest Service departments or branches, the branch to be hardest hit was compliance and enforcement, or C&E, continuing a trend set with the earlier round of reductions between 2001 and 2004. Twenty-two C&E staff positions were eliminated, meaning that nearly one in every 10 jobs cut from the public payroll was in the compliance and enforcement area. This reduced the total complement of C&E staff by just over 10 per cent, leaving a combined total for the department, including managerial and support positions, of approximately 195 full-time positions. Such reductions mean that we are losing our collective eyes and ears in the forest, a trend that is unfortunately being replicated in other provincial government departments, including the Ministry of Environment.¹⁰

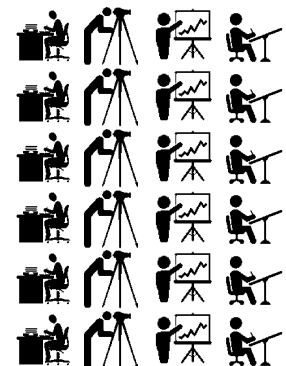
With the loss of eight full-time positions, the number of Forest Service employees working in log scaling (measuring and grading logs) fell to 54 positions (including supervisory and support staff), a nearly 13 per cent decline over staffing levels in late 2009. The job losses take on added significance when viewed in light of the above-mentioned C&E cuts, and in light of history. Government scalers at one time measured all logs coming out of provincial forests, but beginning two decades ago that role was largely privatized, with companies taking over scaling and government scalers reduced to an auditing role. And that auditing role may ultimately be diminished further, as a new “stand-as-a-whole” timber-pricing system is brought into place. Under the new pricing system being test-driven in parts of the interior, scaling is eliminated in favour of timber-cruises (cruises estimate the number of standing trees, their species diversity and volume on pre-selected plots of land in a larger area about to be logged). The cruises generate estimates of the total wood volume, which in turn generate a stumpage price to be paid for the entire area about to be logged. No scaling is then deemed to be necessary because, in theory, the volume and value of everything on the logging site has already been captured in the cruise.

There is a big difference, however, between a cruise that estimates the value and volume of trees about to be logged, and measuring and assessing the value of trees that have actually been logged. In conversation with a senior Forest Service scaler, the scaler warned of two significant problems with stand-as-a-whole pricing. First, cruises have a margin of error of plus or minus 12 per cent, while scales are generally close to completely accurate on log volumes and may be marginally out on log values. Second, it is almost impossible to audit after the fact to ensure that the public got fair value for its resources. This is a significant public policy issue, not the least being that it could result in future trade disputes with the powerful US softwood lumber lobby. While stumpage revenues have fallen in recent years to the low hundreds of millions of dollars annually, in years past they have been over \$1 billion and reached as high as \$2 billion. Oversight of log volumes and values by trained public officials ensures both that the public gets fair value for its resources and that our biggest trading partner does not have grounds to argue that timber pricing policies in BC fail to capture optimum stumpage payments.

Research—once a great hallmark of the Forest Service—was also subject to deep cuts, with at least 17 positions eliminated or 7 per cent of the total. Like the losses in C&E, the cuts to research continued the pattern set during earlier rounds of Forest Service cuts. Left after the most recent round of cuts was a total research staffing component, including management and support staff, of 99 positions—a 15 per cent decline over the staffing levels in late 2009 and a roughly 60 per cent decline over the staffing levels in 2000. Among the researchers to lose jobs were men and women with expertise in the critically important area of forest hydrology—where forests at various stages in their lifecycles are studied to learn how they intercept rainfall and snowfall and influence the rate at which snow packs melt. Such information determines how best to manage streamside forests and protect vulnerable fish stocks and is of immense value in assessing flood threats. Other researchers to lose their jobs worked as biologists, ecologists and silviculturalists.

Today, researchers often benefit from the work done by mapping technicians trained to use the latest in digital technology. Thus, cuts to “geomatics” personnel have a direct or indirect impact on Forest Service researchers and other key departments within MOF including: timber supply, silviculture, forest inventory and the office of the Chief Forester, who must decide on the basis of the best available information at what rate the province’s forests can be sustainably cut. With the aid of electronic sensors on the ground and in

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Research 2000



Research 2010

orbiting satellites, geomatics technicians and experts in geographical information systems (GIS) produce sophisticated maps that provide spatial information in ways that mapmakers of old could only dream of—all this being a space technology pioneered by the Forest Service. Ten such positions were eliminated from the Forest Service in this most recent round of job cuts.

Finally, all positions within a healthy functioning public service rely on a corps of support staff to do administrative and clerical support work. Without sufficient support staff, people who were hired for their technical and regulatory expertise are forced, instead, to devote more hours to work they were not intended to do, thus eroding their effectiveness as public servants. Research for this report concludes that 33 staff working as administrative or office assistants, or as records or resource clerks, lost their jobs in the latest round of Forest Service cutbacks—13 per cent of the total.

WHAT THE CUTS MEAN

These reductions mean we are losing our collective eyes and ears in the forest, a trend that is unfortunately being replicated in other provincial government departments, including the Ministry of Environment.

The most immediate effect of office closures and reduced Forest Service staff is to increase the distances between fully staffed offices and to make it less likely that public servants can actually get out onto public lands.

With the closure of the Prince Rupert field office, for example, the nearest Forest Service office is now 147 kilometres away in Terrace. This may not seem that great a distance until one considers that many of the lands under the former jurisdiction of Prince Rupert are only accessible by boat, floatplane or helicopter. Such is the nature of a remote coastal region, which is also the site of a booming trade in raw log exports, in high-grading of cedar (high-grading being the targeted taking of desirable trees and the wasting of most other species) and extremely high volumes of usable log waste¹¹—three phenomena that are open to abuses if not sufficiently monitored. With fewer Forest Service personnel and vastly reduced budgets, less travel to remote field locations will be possible. Furthermore, when travel does occur, individual trips to remote locations will be more expensive due to the additional distances that must be traveled as a result of office closures and downsizings.

With that in mind, how may some job losses at Forest Service offices across the province reasonably be expected to affect the provision of key services?

Scaling

Because the quality and quantity of wood in trees varies, scaling or measuring and grading logs is essential to set accurate stumpage fees (the fees companies pay the province for trees cut on public lands). As discussed above, for 25 years, logging companies have been responsible for doing their own scales, with public servants then performing check scales or audits to keep the companies honest and to ensure accuracy.

Recent Forest Service cutbacks have further whittled away at scaling staff, making it less and less likely that rigorous auditing work will be done on the public's behalf. A prime example of this is in northeastern BC, where the sole Forest Service check scaler in Fort Nelson recently lost her job, leaving the next closest government check scaler 414 kilometres away in Dawson Creek.



In 2002/03, during the previous round of job losses in the Forest Service, the annual provincial log harvest was 71 million cubic metres, and the number of Forest Service personnel doing check scaling was 69. While the log harvest in 2009/10 was considerably lower at 54.3 million cubic metres, the number of government check scalers was lower still at 42.¹² In 2002/03, each provincial scaling official was responsible on average for 1.02 million cubic metres of timber harvested, or one person for every 29,400 truckloads of logs. Today, the ratio is one scaler for every 1.29 million cubic metres of timber harvested, or 36,961 truckloads of logs. More log loads to screen with fewer people to do the screening does not bode well for provincial scaling staff or the public they serve. Nor does it bode well for compliance and enforcement work—another key Forest Service job function that has also been hard hit by past and recent job cuts.

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Compliance and Enforcement

As the Forest Service has shrunk, there has been a corresponding decline in field inspections by its compliance and enforcement staff. In 2000/01, C&E staff completed 31,109 field inspections. Four years later, the number of inspections had been nearly halved to 16,651.¹³ The most recent loss of a further 22 C&E positions will undoubtedly lower the number of future inspections, and require a change in the way C&E staff work.

In years past, C&E staff worked closely with other Forest Service departments to coordinate efforts. For example, scalers were called on to assist in investigating companies that may have illegally logged trees or misrepresented the volume and value of the timber they logged. According to a recent C&E report, 58 per cent of all enforcement actions against

major licensees (companies holding long-term logging rights) necessitated some scaling work. With both the number of provincial scaling officials and provincial C&E officials down, there is less likelihood that such cooperative work will occur in the months ahead. As a senior C&E official contacted during research for this report noted:

Some of our C&E staff do have scaling licenses; however, when and where possible, we rely on the expertise and knowledge of scalers when we are actually having to prove that an offence has occurred. Scaling staff are able to quickly determine log grade, quality, and species. They are considered officials under the legislation and also have the authority to issue violation tickets, though certainly for any alleged offences that warrant action more serious than a violation ticket, scalers refer the matter to the C&E program. Over the past few months C&E staff have taken on a greater role in conducting scale site inspections, which were traditionally conducted by scalers.¹⁴

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Dan Harlow, a C&E worker in Grand Forks, was among those to lose his job in the latest round of cutbacks after serving 29 years with the Forest Service. In the past decade, Grand Forks went from being a full service district office to a field office for the Castlegar Forest District. Now, with Castlegar itself reduced to a field office, both staff in Grand Forks and Castlegar report to the nearest remaining district office in Nelson—more than two hours' drive from Grand Forks.

Harlow says the general public doesn't understand how forest companies can break the rules and reduce their costs. For example, companies can overstate the logging roads they are about to build, which has the effect of lowering their stumpage rates. The only way to detect this is to go into the field to compare the actual roads built against what was stated would be built.¹⁵ Harlow believes that were such inspections increased, there would be a corresponding rise in the number of reported infractions. In the meantime, the Forest Service's Compliance and Enforcement Branch does still produce an annual report of its activities, listing numerous infractions, including companies that failed to mark the logs they cut (which can result in stumpage fees failing to be paid), illegal logging of Crown timber and unauthorized construction of logging roads, to name a few.)¹⁶

Ten years ago, Harlow says, the Grand Forks C&E team consisted of five people who were each out in the field an average of 3.5 to four days a week. "We looked at every road construction plan, special-use permit and logging operation of any description," Harlow says. Today's staff level is two, and the number of field days is down to two to three days a week, a result of reduced travel budgets and staff support. C&E staff have attempted to make the most of a bad situation by "risk rating," or targeting the most likely offenses for a greater number of inspections. "But from my experience, the industry knows we're doing that," Harlow says. "So they simply cut corners in the lower risk areas."

Inventory

While other Forest Service departments sustained greater job losses, the three full-time positions lost in forest inventory in the most recent round of cutbacks continued a trend that those both within and outside of the department decry. With the job losses, the total complement for the entire inventory program fell to 39 people, including management and support staff.

“They’ve literally gutted inventory and research to the point where there’s no program left to speak of,” says one long-time public servant who was let go in the most recent round of cuts after working for the Forest Service for 35 years.¹⁷

The forester noted that without good inventory data (quantifying what trees grow where) no one can state with certainty what a sustainable logging rate is. He noted that the job has become a lot more important in light of the mountain pine beetle, which has attacked an area of forest in BC roughly equivalent in size to England. Only a rigorous and thorough inventory can provide a true picture of the number of living and dead trees in forests attacked by pests or burned in fires.

Moreover, once such an inventory is done it must be complemented by “growth and yield” analysis, which essentially looks at how the trees on inventoried sites grow over time and how much timber they can reasonably be expected to yield as they grow. To do this work, the Forest Service has established about 5,000 sample plots spread across the province, which are checked to see how their trees grow. A former Forest Service official, who asked not to be identified, said that due to cutbacks virtually no such analysis was slated to take place in 2010. The biggest task remaining for the limited number of Forest Service staff still doing such work is to ensure that the plots—a rich repository of information gleaned over decades of field measurements and observation—are not logged.

Another former Forest Service employee who asked that his name not be used because his company does contract work for the government, said that the budget available for contractors to do inventory work has steadily eroded. A few years ago, \$10 million was available; a decade ago, \$20 million. This year it was to fall to \$2 million and only after vigorous protest was topped up to \$3.1 million.¹⁸

The same former Forest Service employee noted that in the early 1990s, there were 100 inventory specialists in the Forest Service at Victoria headquarters alone. Back then there were twice the number of regional and district offices, with dedicated inventory teams in each of the six regions and at least one inventory forester in each of the 42 districts. Today’s total province-wide complement is 39—and this number includes administrative support staff.

With the steady erosion in inventory personnel, numerous Timber Supply Areas in BC remain without new inventories 30 years or more after the last inventories were done, the former Forest Service official said. Among the TSAs with inferior, decades old inventories are the Mid Coast, Okanagan, Nass, Cassiar, Fort Nelson, Kalum, Lakes and Morice TSAs. And that’s under the old inventory standards, which focused only on timber. If the more sophisticated “vegetation resources inventory” or VRI standard is considered, one which accounts for a fuller range of plant life in our forests, “at least half the province” has not been inventoried. This latter point is perhaps the most significant. As we learn more about how important it is to maintain a healthy array of plant and animal life in a period of climate change, a greater premium is being placed on biological diversity. VRI inventories, as opposed to much more narrowly focused “timber” inventories, reflect that reality, which makes it all the more important that such inventory work is funded and completed in a timely way.

Anthony Britneff, who retired in March 2010 after a 39-year career in the Forest Service that included stints in inventory, forest health and silviculture, said that the lack of baseline information means the public can have no confidence that their forests are sustainably managed.



Forest Service staffing is so low that monitoring tree growth in a provincial grid of 5,000 sample plots has ground to a halt. The big job now is to try to keep the plots from being logged and their value to scientists lost forever.

“How can you reliably determine timber supply for annual allowable cuts if you don’t have a good inventory of what is there and what isn’t?” Britneff asked in a recent magazine article detailing the sorry state of the provincial Forest Service.¹⁹ He went on to note that inventories are vital to capture what the true extent of BC’s reforestation crisis is; a crisis exacerbated in recent years by the pine beetle attack and other climate-related forest health issues, increasing forest fires, and accelerated logging activities in years past in response to the beetles. He estimated such an inventory could show that as much as nine million hectares of land—an area three times larger than Vancouver Island—may be not sufficiently stocked and therefore not growing trees to their fullest potential.

Recently, BC’s Forests Minister Pat Bell publicly boasted that the province planted 20 million trees in 2010 in an effort to reduce the amount of insufficiently forested land and provide “a sustainable timber supply” for future generations.²⁰ What he did not say is that in the late 1980s and 1990s, as a result of provincially and federally funded reforestation programs, five times the number of trees were planted, in addition to other efforts to thin and prune trees (which increase both the volume and value of timber harvested in future years) and clearing brush (which helps to boost the growth of young trees and can reduce the severity of forest fires).

Britneff emphasizes that only by undertaking inventory and silviculture field surveys will the Forest Service determine the actual extent of the not stocked area (i.e., inventory gross NSR) and how much of it is suitable and economically feasible to replant (i.e., silviculture net NSR). He estimates that as much as three million hectares of the best forestland might be economically feasible to replant. The remaining area would be left to nature to reforest eventually.

Such critiques strongly suggest the need for a significantly ramped up public reforestation effort. Yet, a key conclusion flowing from this report is that a vastly reduced Forest Service will be unable to effectively lead that effort, let alone spearhead other important initiatives.

The wholesale dismantling of key Forest Service departments and the creation of the new Ministry of Natural Resource Operations will make the provision of key public services even more difficult.

The impact of the reorganization on just one Forest Service department, the Research Branch, is instructive in that regard. Under the reorganization, the department, which was in its 84th year of operation, has been scattered in four different directions. Some Branch scientists now work for the Ministry of Environment. Others work for the Ministry of Agriculture. Others report to restructured departments in the reconstituted Ministry of Forests, Mines and Lands. And still others report to the Ministry of Natural Resource Operations.

Whether the four ministries, each facing their own unique budget challenges, will see fit to maintain the programs once run by the Research Branch is a question to be answered in the fullness of time. But privately, Forest Service personnel say they are “in shock” at the magnitude of the changes. All bets may be off for various research programs, including some that have produced valuable data year in and year out on water flows in logged watersheds – the kind of information that could help to set BC on a sustainable footing for generations to come in the management of its public forest and water resources.



Recently, BC’s Forests Minister Pat Bell publicly boasted that the province planted 20 million trees in 2010 in an effort to reduce the amount of insufficiently forested land and provide “a sustainable timber supply” for future generations. What he did not say is that in the late 1980s and 1990s, five times the number of trees were planted through publicly-funded programs.

CONCLUSION

British Columbia's Forest Service will mark its 100th anniversary in 2012. But it will be a milestone marked more by sadness than joy. In the past decade, 1,006 positions within the service have been cut, leading a growing number of people within its ranks or who recently have been let go or retired to question whether public forest resources are being sustainably managed and the public adequately compensated for trees logged on public lands.

Such questions are certain to escalate in light of the dramatic provincial Cabinet reorganization noted at the beginning of this report. In the immediate aftermath of the reorganization, then provincial Energy Minister Bill Bennett took the extraordinary step of publicly criticizing Premier Gordon Campbell, and he didn't just single out the impacts to his ministry in that regard.

"The fundamental problem facing the natural resource ministries is they're underfunded," Bennett said. "We work the heck out of them [the employees] and we don't have enough funds within these ministries to get the permits out the door, to develop the policy, to deal with the stakeholders, to do the work that actually leads to the majority of the revenue that comes in to government."²¹

As this report suggests, diminished capacity within the ranks of the Forest Service has led to demonstrable reductions in public oversight. It is difficult to see how such reductions will not continue when what remains of a once venerable institution has been cleaved in two.

This is not the first time the Forest Service has had to adjust to difficult new realities. And during darker chapters in the Service's history, "downsized" staff showed that they were capable of doing yeoman's service in the face of adversity, fulfilling important roles in fire protection, reforestation, timber supply, forest health, research and analysis and a wide array of monitoring and enforcement activities. But will a dramatically reduced and now physically divided Forest Service split between ministries be capable of meeting the challenges that lie ahead?

Climate change, for example, has fueled the mountain pine beetle attack, contributed to drought-like conditions throughout much of the province, and spurred the frequency and intensity of forest fires. Can the Forest Service devise and implement an effective response?

The reforestation challenge, as another example, has increased in scale and complexity, in part because of a steady decline in provincial and federal dollars to cover reforestation costs, but also because of the run-up in small-scale logging in response to insect attacks and fires, and the ongoing impact of climate change to forest health. Can the Forest Service effectively devise and implement a comprehensive reforestation and forest restoration program?

Protecting communities from fire is a final example. Can the Forest Service devise and implement plans that help communities reduce the risk of severe fires on their peripheries through a comprehensive program of tree and brush clearing?

It has now been nearly 20 years since the last significant independent inquiry into the state of BC's forests issued its first report. In the ensuing years since the British Columbia Forest



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Resources Commission toured the province and solicited opinions on the state of BC's forests, much has changed—including a steady rise and then fall in Forest Service budgets and personnel.

There is no better time than now—on the eve of the Forest Service's centenary—to appoint a new commission to address the questions that need to be asked. Is the creation of a new Ministry of Natural Resource Operations that has assumed many of the operational functions of the Forest Service a wise public policy choice? Is the Forest Service, as currently constituted, capable of properly serving the public? If not, what is needed by way of reinstated staffing, budgets and responsibilities to close the gap? Are there restructuring options other than the cleaving in two of the Forest Service that might more closely tie the Forest Service to the communities and public it once so capably served? And if so, what might such a restructuring look like?



There is no better time than now – on the eve of the Forest Service's centenary – to appoint a new commission to address the questions that need to be asked.

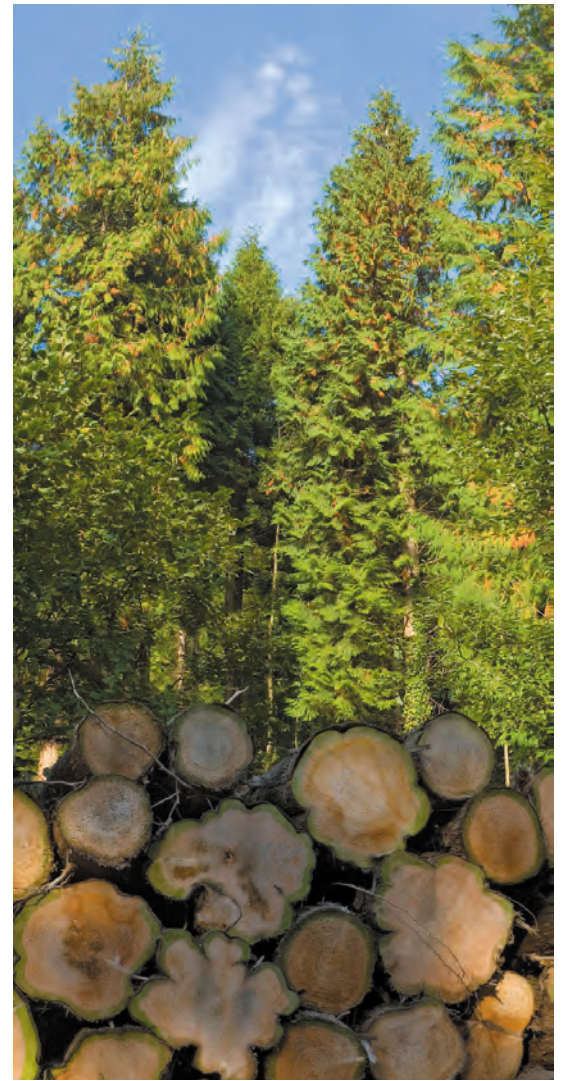
While such an inquiry is underway, there should be a moratorium on any further cuts to the Forest Service and a halt to the questionable and potentially dangerous reorganization of the dirt ministries, including the Forest Service. As this paper demonstrates, the loss of 1,006 Forest Service positions over the past decade has seriously undermined the ability of public servants to manage public forests to a standard the public deserves. Moreover, there is a growing awareness that now is the time for a new forestry that results in forests that are more resilient in the face of climate change—a management approach that demands both more forest conservation for purposes of increased carbon storage and a new forest products manufacturing strategy that places a premium on the output of solid wood products that store carbon for decades if not generations to come. A healthy, invigorated Forest Service will be essential to ensuring that such a transition occurs and that our collective desire for healthy forests and sustainable communities is met.

Notes

- 1 Office of the Premier, "Premier Campbell Announces Cabinet Changes" (news release, October 25, 2010).
- 2 Established in 1912, the BC Forest Service has fallen under the jurisdiction of several departments and ministries. As of October 25, 2010, the BC Forest Service is contained within the Ministry of Forests, Mines and Lands. In this paper, we refer simply to the "Forest Service."
- 3 Ben Parfitt and Kerri Garner, *Axing the Forest Service: How British Columbians are losing their eyes and ears in the forest* (Sierra Club of Canada—BC Chapter, November 2004).
- 4 Dana Hayden, "Deputy's Message to All Forest Service Staff" (e-mail correspondence, April 12, 2010).
- 5 The cumulative loss of an estimated 1,006 positions is based on analysis of quarterly provincial government payroll data that breaks down provincial government employment by ministry and which is submitted to various bargaining units, including the Professional Employees Association and the BC Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU). In the first quarter of 2001, prior to the cutbacks that began to be initiated resulting in the loss of 800 Forest Service positions, employment in BC's Ministry of Forests was listed as 4,011 (Source: BC Government Public Service Act Employees by Ministry and Employee Group Based on 2001-Jan-06 Payroll Data). At the beginning of the last quarter of 2009, prior to the most recent round of Forest Service job losses, the corresponding number was 3,734

(BC Government Public Service Act Employees by Ministry and Employee Group Based on 2009-Oct-31 Payroll Data). The figure of 3,734 includes, however, members of the Integrated Land Management Bureau or ILMB, who were only recently rolled into the Forest Service. So a more accurate comparison between years would exclude them from the tally. Approximately 484 provincial government employees are ILMB members. When they are excluded from the list, the actual number of people working within the Forest Service prior to the most recent job losses was in the vicinity of 3,250. When the 245 jobs recently lost in the Forest Service are then subtracted from that number, the current estimated Forest Service staff falls to 3,005 positions, meaning that the total combined Forest Service job losses over the past decade are on the order of 1,006 positions, a decline of 25 per cent.

- 6 BC Ministry of Finance, *Budget and Fiscal Plan: 2009/10 – 2011/12*, February 17, 2009.
- 7 BC Ministry of Forests and Range, *2008/09 Annual Service Plan Report*, July 22, 2009.
- 8 BC Ministry of Finance, *Estimates: Fiscal Year Ending March 31, 2011*, February 17, 2009.
- 9 To arrive at the portion of the reduced budget attributed to reduced payroll, numbers contained in Dana Hayden's Message to Forest Service Staff (see note above) are used. In the message, Hayden notes that as a result of various ministry personnel taking voluntary reductions in hours of work, a savings of \$642,000 was achieved. The same memo states that the savings allowed MOF to retain eight jobs that otherwise would have been eliminated, meaning on average one job preserved for every \$80,250 in savings. If that average is applied to the 245 jobs cut from the Forest Service, it amounts to \$19.6 million, which means that most of the \$179 million pared from Ministry of Forests' budgets between 2008/09 and 2010/11 is not a result of lower payroll but rather cuts to program budgets. In other words, fewer people working with fewer resources on the public's behalf.
- 10 Wilderness Committee, "The BC Budget Pushes Environment Off the Podium" (news release, March 2, 2010). The press release notes that the recent provincial budget allocated 2.4 per cent fewer dollars to the provincial Environment Ministry and that ministry employees who retired or left their positions would not be replaced, leading to anticipated staff reductions on the order of 4 to 5 per cent per year.
- 11 In 2009, the CCPA's BC Office released an analysis of usable wood waste volumes at logging sites across the province (*Shortchanged: Tallying the Legacy of Waste in BC's Logging Industry*. March 2009.) The report, which used Forest Service data, noted that in one year in and around Prince Rupert, fully half of all reported logging volumes were left behind at logging sites.
- 12 Annual log harvest data is obtainable through the Ministry of Forests' Harvest Billing System (HBS) database, available to members of the public at: <https://www15.for.gov.bc.ca/hbs/>.
- 13 Ministry of Forests, *Compliance and Enforcement Branch Annual Report 2000-2001*, 2001; Ministry of Forests and Range, *Compliance and Enforcement Program 2005 Annual Report Year Ended March 31st, 2005*, 2005.
- 14 Personal communication, August 11, 2010.
- 15 Daniel Harlow, personal communication, July 14, 2010.
- 16 Ministry of Forests and Range, *Compliance and Enforcement Program, Annual Report for Year Ended March 31, 2009*.
- 17 Personal communication, August 15, 2010.
- 18 Personal communication, August 9, 2010.
- 19 Briony Penn, "The Big Burn," *Focus Magazine*, August 2010, www.focusonline.ca/?q=node/71.
- 20 For a discussion of Bell's comments and reaction to them see Ben Parfitt, "Pat Bell's YouTube Foray – Sowing Seeds of Misinformation" on the PolicyNote blog site at www.policynote.ca/pat-bells-youtube-foray-sewing-seeds-of-misinformation/
- 21 Jonathon Fowlie, "Energy minister blasts Gordon Campbell over cabinet shuffle: B.C. premier didn't consult with caucus – again, Bill Bennett fumes," *The Vancouver Sun*, October 26, 2010.



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Axed: A Decade of Cuts to BC's Forest Service

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December 2010

The author expresses his thanks to those who provided helpful feedback: Anthony Britneff, George Heyman, Jodi Jensen, Seth Klein, Brenton Walters, and Jens Wieting.

The opinions in this report, and any errors, are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publishers or funders of this report.

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ISBN: 978-1-926888-39-2