

# Guest column: We're losing key knowledge about our forests

BY ANTHONY BRITNEFF AND BEN PARFITT, THE PROVINCE    APRIL 19, 2011



B.C. has little information on depletion of its forest inventory due to logging, the pine beetle and a spate of forest fires, say our guest columnists.

**Photograph by:** Video screengrab, B.C. Forest Fire Info

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If you're a clerk in the produce department at the local supermarket you have a big task on your hands.

Not only must you track how quickly the bins of apples, lemons, lettuce, radishes and dozens of other fruits and vegetables are depleted, but you must constantly root out the rotten from the fresh and be ever vigilant that behind the swinging storeroom door there's sufficient replacement stock.

Good inventories anchor successful businesses. So it's worth asking: If you had a stock inventory narrowly valued at \$250 billion, would you want to know how quickly it is depleted and replenished?

That, by the way, is the estimated value of the available, commercially desirable trees in B.C.'s publicly owned forests. If you consider the additional values our forests have as carbon storehouses, the protector of water resources, the life-support system for numerous plants and animals and the source of tens of thousands of jobs, you could perhaps quadruple that value.

You might assume that understanding how our forest inventory changes over time should be a top priority for the B.C. government. Unfortunately, you'd be wrong. In a dozen years, successive governments have cut funding so deeply that foresters in both the public and private sectors have lost confidence that we know the true status of one of our most vital natural assets.

The bottom line is we don't really know how much our forests have been depleted by logging activities, the mountain pine beetle, other forest insect and disease outbreaks and a spate of horrendous forest fires. And there are corresponding concerns over just how "satisfactorily restocked" such lands are. Have we planted enough trees? Are those trees still thriving?

Two decades ago, the province spent on average \$22.3 million each year on forest inventories. In the decade just past, annual expenditures plummeted 61 per cent to an average of just \$8.8 million. For the current fiscal year, the projected inventory budget sits at \$7.5 million.

In 2006, noting this troubling trend, the Association of B.C. Forest Professionals warned that it was unfolding at the worst possible of times, with climate change wreaking havoc in our forests. Not only did the provincial government fail to heed the association's concerns, but in the intervening years its inventory funding remained wholly inadequate.

Not surprisingly, the funding reductions were mirrored in deep staff cuts. Twenty years ago, a complement of 188 men and women worked for the forest service on inventory tasks; just 39 remain today. Declines in the contractor community have been equally severe.

This gutting of forest-management resources helps to explain why the province's own State of British Columbia's Forests report for 2010 noted that three quarters of the province had yet to be surveyed to the government's own standard.

But enough of the bad news, let's focus instead on the way out of the box we're in. We should begin with a firm commitment to steady, secure inventory funding in each of the next 10 years at \$25 million per year or \$16 million more than was spent annually during the last decade.

Where do we get the money? Well, let's start with the public forest resource itself. Considering that B.C. collects hundreds of millions of dollars annually in timber-cutting or stumpage fees, \$16 million is not a lot of money. It can easily be recouped. Here are two ways:

First, rigorously monitor industry compliance with rules requiring full reporting of all logs harvested by species and grade -rules that some logging companies flout, as forest service monitoring and enforcement efforts routinely reveal.

Second, raise B.C.'s embarrassingly low minimum stumpage fee from 25 cents a cubic metre to, say, a dollar. Surely each telephone pole worth of our wood is worth that.

Getting a handle once and for all on what we have in our forests is vital if we are to have healthy forests, communities and families in future years. Doing so requires that we invest. Common business sense says to put some of that investment into inventory efforts.

If we don't know what we have, we can't hope to manage it.

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