

Is there a future in forestry? You bet, it may just be different from what you expect.

By Al Balogh, RPF, vice-president, Association of BC Forest Professionals

It is becoming more and more difficult to recruit for the forest sector across the province. Why? Forestry has been painted with a negative brush over the years. Many people feel that it is a 'sunset' industry due to the softwood lumber dispute, mountain pine beetle epidemic and a 'soft' coastal industry. These negative images have affected enrollment in post-secondary forestry programs to such an extent that some of them are struggling to survive.

I'm not going to pretend these and other factors don't have an impact on forestry. Of course they do! However, professional forestry continues to be a dynamic, challenging and exciting career. Demographics mean that there are far fewer people entering the workforce than those retiring. These changes mean there is tremendous opportunity today for bright young people to make their mark on BC's top employment sector.

While I can't predict the future, I feel quite comfortable in saying that there will be jobs available across the forest sector including careers in government, industry and consulting. Professional forestry jobs are going to evolve over time to adapt to changing circumstances.

Here in the Interior, the mountain pine beetle epidemic is already changing the way the forest is managed. We are going to need silviculture experts as reforestation of the area will be more difficult due to a lack of local seeds. Forest managers will be needed to do the intensive tending and rehabilitation to devastated areas where the low price for wood has made it economically unsound to salvage the pine. Fire specialists will be needed to manage forest fuels and to minimize the potential impact of catastrophic wildfires on rural residents.

Climate change will have a big impact on forestry all over the world, but especially here in BC. Because forestry works on an 80 year cycle, it is hard to predict what the climate will be like at the end of the cycle. Do we plant tree species that are appropriate for today's climate or do we try to guess what trees will be better suited to a climate 80 years from now? We will need forest specialists with a scientific background in many areas including silviculture, hydrology, ecology, biodiversity and forest health to properly manage the forests of tomorrow.

There is tremendous opportunity for young people who want to go into forestry today. We need people with a love of the outdoors, computer skills and scientific knowledge. We need people who want to sustainably manage the forests so they are around for generations to come.

The Association of BC Forest Professionals (ABCFP) is working with other groups, including post-secondary institutions across Canada, to encourage recruitment into the profession. Work is happening both nationally and provincially to try to reverse the decline in enrollment numbers. At the local level, the ABCFP is participating in career fairs and sending professional forestry career information to virtually every high school in the province.

More information on careers in forestry can be found on the ABCFP website at www.abcfp.ca.

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