

From New France to China: BC's Forest Products are a Strategic Commodity

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING THAT

Canada's economic prosperity was built on its plentiful natural resources. However, few realize the important role forestry has played in securing the country's prosperity and security.

In the early 1700s, the forest industry was instrumental in raising New France's fortunes. Not only was timber exported to France and its colonies, but Montreal and Quebec City became major shipbuilding centers. As the conflict with Britain intensified during the middle of the century, the colony started local production of naval vessels.

The forestry industry mushroomed after the British conquest of the colony, driven by growing demand from Europe—a continent with widespread deforestation. Forest products became a critical strategic commodity for Great Britain, particularly after the American Revolution. The loss of New England meant that Canada became the empire's main source of timber for the Royal Navy and private traders. The colony enjoyed favorable tariff regulations that offered it preferential access to the British market. Moreover the US became a naval threat to Canada, requiring the formation of a national navy to defend the Great Lakes.

Unfortunately, the forest industry's honeymoon with shipbuilding was not to last. Canada's need for a robust navy dissipated after the War of 1812 and there was a slow technical progression away from wooden ships in the late 1800s. While these shifts reduced forest products' significance as a strategic commodity, it remained an important resource for strengthening Canada's prosperity and its foreign relations.

Nowhere was this strength more apparent than in the Pacific Northwest, where the territory's ownership was disputed by Britain and the United States. The massive influx of settlers into British Columbia after 1855 facilitated the development of the forestry sector. The new province quickly became the largest forest products producer in Canada, solidifying its territorial integrity and positions within the dominion. Later, exports to the United States supplemented, then supplanted, those to Britain and the British Empire. It strengthened the growing cross-border trade relationship, which encouraged the present peaceful relationship between the two countries.

Considering the importance of forest products in Canada's history, the forest industry's effect on the government has also been

significant. The constitution of 1867 placed forestry in the expressed domain of provincial governments, which suited provincial interests. However, a number of conflicting areas of responsibility complicated matters. Commerce, international trade and foreign policy remained the purview of the federal government, which Ottawa retained

exclusive control over up until the 1960s. This relationship witnessed significant change in the 1970s and 1980s, as provinces sought to ensure their interests were being represented on the international stage. In the 1980s the conflict played out over several different trade issues, most notably the Canada-US Free Trade agreement.

The forestry industry contributed to, and was affected by, wider trends on international trade and federalism. This was apparent during the both 1980s iterations of the softwood lumber dispute with the United States. During the second iteration in 1986, Premier Bill Vander Zalm, after making some damaging remarks, attempted to protect the forest industry by representing the province's interests directly, instead of leaving it up to federal government. Although it was greeted with significant consternation in Ottawa, the effort helped carve a greater role for provincial leaders in managing the international dimensions of their industries.

The benefits of federalism can be discerned with the growing links between cross-border communities, provinces and states that have emerged in the past twenty years. These efforts have been spurred on in part by cross border investment and consolidation in the forestry industry. The most visible aspect of these relationships has been the growth of bilateral gatherings, like the Pacific Northwest Economic Region and the Pacific Coast Collaborative. These events involve industry and high-level government representatives from both sides of the border and all levels of government. The practical effects of these gatherings are numerous. In addition to harmonizing regulations and practices to facilitate trade, provincial participation has encouraged a more nuanced view on how to influence the US political system. This may have important consequences for future negotiations regarding softwood lumber practices.

The 1970s and 80s saw the emergence of a new trend in the forest industry, when Prime Minister Trudeau's government sought to





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Footnotes

¹ United States wildfire suppression personnel, including Fire Behaviour Analysts, typically rely on their own decision aids for tactical planning purposes when serving on fire assignments in Canada.

² Based on principles outlined in peer-reviewed literature and previously reported in *BC Forest Professional* (July-August 2008).

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diversify Canada's trade relations away from its singular focus with the United States. While Ottawa's efforts were aimed at developing links with Europe, British Columbia followed a different tack. The province made a concerted effort to increase forestry exports into the Asia Pacific, which was experiencing unprecedented growth. The policy quickly bore fruit, as Japan became the second largest importer of British Columbian forest products. Likewise, China also emerged an important export market due to its impressive economic progress and voracious appetite for raw materials. Canada routinely showcases forestry products inside the country, while supports trade and technology programs to facilitate their use.

The flexibility of the federalist system has become apparent with these relationships with Japan and China. British Columbia's autonomy has allowed it to press ahead with its own trade efforts, despite a general chill in Ottawa's relationship with Beijing. Moreover the province is better placed to leverage linkages with local Chinese communities in order to cultivate economic links. The diversification of Canada's trade relations has become a major boon for the country and the province. It has partially supported the industry despite the prolonged economic downturn in the United States, while providing an avenue for dialogue and cooperation with an emerging superpower.

In short, it's fairly clear the important, and sometimes critical, role forest products have played in determining Canada's position within the international sphere. It has assisted in growing the country's prosperity, while strengthening its relations with the predominant superpower of the time. British Columbia has become increasingly important part of this equation, establishing trade links with foreign countries directly. All of these factors bode well for Canada, British Columbia and the forest industry's health now and in the future. 🐾

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