



Opportunity and Midterm Timber Supply

THERE'S BEEN A LOT OF CONCERN about the potential fibre our industry requires to keep it healthy 15 plus years from now. The mountain pine beetle's impacts on our pine forests combined with other issues are threatening the industry's future. I share some of these concerns but at the same time I see this as an enormous opportunity.

It's probably good to look back at the history of our forest industry to find clues about what may happen in the future. More than 100 years ago, people came to the interior of BC and thought the trees were too small to consider processing. Fifty years ago, pine trees were considered an undesirable product. Unless they were large enough for poles or railway ties, they were left behind or burned. Today, small wood production and pine trees are major components of our Interior industry.

We know that our fibre supply will decline in about 15 years given the current standards. But if we can economically capture fibre from lower volume stands through utilizing some of the undesirable fibre for new industries such as pellets, bio-energy or bio-fuels, we can start to reduce those impacts. In some management units, utilizing lower volume stands than is the current practice has the potential to make a big difference because it will expand the potential fibre available. A drop of just 10 cubic metres per hectare would bring a sizable increase in the amount of wood available to our cut.

Much can change in 15 years and our forest industry will likely be no exception. Biofuels, pellets and a host of other products will likely be common in our future. How we think about fibre and forest products will also change with this as we become more focused on the total fibre basket rather than just the saw log component. Innovations like the wood gasification power plant at UNBC and the associated research is a good example of how things could change.

So what does this mean for our current forest industry? That depends on many variables including how we invest in silviculture, advancements in transportation, product prices and how diversified our industry becomes.



Innovations like the wood gasification power plant at UNBC and the associated research is a good example of how things could change.

Photo: Courtesy of University of Northern British Columbia

We know that our transportation costs limit our ability to access large amounts of fibre. For example, there is about 80 million cubic metres of fibre in the north end of the Fort St. James Forest District and another 220 million cubic metres in the north end of the Mackenzie Forest District that are currently not contributing towards our allowable annual cut because of access issues. If we can make transportation more efficient and if product prices become strong enough, this fibre can go a long way towards alleviating much of the midterm timber supply for many areas.

Intensive silviculture has the potential to make a dramatic difference to our midterm timber supply as well. Through early rotation, fertilization, thinning and other activities, a \$200 million investment per year in intensive silviculture could yield an approximate increase of between 10 and 12 million cubic metres per year to our allowable annual cut.

Minimizing the impacts of various constraints such as visual impact objectives and old growth management areas while exploring options for area based management of our land base, have significant potential for increasing the way we manage our fibre and for increasing our yields.

Ultimately, our forest industry will not be what it once was. But then again, our forest industry today isn't what it once was either. The type of timber we access, the way we manage our stands, the utilization of fibre and the traditional markets will all look different in the coming decade.

The challenges we are now facing should be looked at as opportunities. If we embrace those opportunities, if we invest in silviculture and change the way we manage our land base, I'm confident our forest industry will not only remain a significant component of the future prosperity of BC but it will become a healthier and more resilient industry. 🌱

John Rustad was re-elected to represent the newly redistributed riding of Nechako Lakes on May 12, 2009, and was appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Silviculture to the Minister of Forests and Range from June 10, 2009 through March 2011.