

Managing Expectations: The Coastal Forest Action Plan

"The solution is clear."

**MESSAGE FROM BC'S MINISTER OF FORESTS
IN *The Forest Revitalization Plan* (2003).**

"There is no 'silver bullet' ..."

MINISTER'S MESSAGE IN *The Coastal Forest Action Plan* (2007).

THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT SEEMS TO HAVE ADAPTED A DECIDEDLY more understated rhetoric to describe the objectives of its forest policies. In 2003, the minister expected the Forest Revitalization Plan to, "reinvigorate the economic foundation of the province." Now, the current minister's expectation for the Coastal Forest Action Plan (the action plan) is simply that, "the coastal forest sector will continue to evolve." No risk of going out on a limb there!

The government's experience with forest policy gives it good reason to lower expectations. Under the Forest Revitalization Plan, it eliminated appurtenance, annual cut control and minimum harvest levels. It amended Bill 13 to better reflect market values. It implemented results-based forest practices and market stumpage. It took back 20% of the province's allowable annual cut to seek accommodations with First Nations and to improve timber access to encourage diversification and innovation. It also marketed BC's world-class forest practices in foreign markets to counter boycott campaigns. And it resolved the softwood lumber dispute. Yet, in spite of these substantive policies, the forest industry on the BC coast now seems worse off than ever before.

It's not to say that this plan didn't help—who knows what may have happened without these policies. But, after all this, government might reasonably ask, "what else can we possibly do?" And the answer we get from the action plan is, apparently, not much.

The action plan is not a legislative agenda like the Forest Revitalization Plan, though it may still require some legislation. For example, the plan references amendments to the scaling and timber marking regulations made last summer and in 2006. In other words, this action item was already done before the action plan came into existence. The goal of 'Land Use Certainty' may also result in new forms of area-based tenures under the *Forest Act*.

However, the action plan is fundamentally about non-legislative strategies with uncertain deliverables. For example, the plan seeks, "innovation through science and technology" and contemplates numerous research projects. While one can hardly argue with innovation through science and technology, the results of the research and what it will mean for the struggling coastal forest sector are, obviously, unknown. Similarly, government plans to form

a 'pulp and paper task force' with industry to improve competitiveness. While undoubtedly a good idea, the specific remedies for the industry's current problems on the coast are, again, unknown.

Government also wants to accelerate the shift towards second-growth harvesting, and plans to invest \$15 million in incremental silviculture activities over the next three years to do so. But even putting aside any debate over the effectiveness of an investment in incremental silviculture, one still wonders how accelerating the availability of second-growth from 70-75 years to 50-55 years will remedy today's problems on the coast.

The government has also planned changes to its log export policies and intends to link the so-called fee in lieu of manufacturing to the export tax applicable to lumber exports. The idea is to reduce the incentive to export logs when the export tax on lumber is high. Again, the immediate benefit for the coast is unclear. All this policy seems to ensure is that when the manufacturing sector on the coast suffers due to high export taxes, then so will the logging sector.

Other action items in Coastal Forest Action Plan, whether individually or collectively, seem even less likely to answer our current troubles on the coast. This is not intended as criticism, rather it is simply to point out that so long as the structure of the industry on the coast remains fundamentally unchanged—public ownership of forest lands, closed-shop labour and log export policies that have remained essentially unchanged since 1906—then there is simply not much more any government could do. It's all just so much tinkering around the edges now. ☛

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