

Log exports and water quality are lightning rods

PORT ALBERNI | Timberland fragmentation and 'global markets' also conspire against sustainability

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Last of three parts

PORT ALBERNI

Wayne Crowley is proud to call himself a logger, but when he looks at the logged slope immediately above his Beaver Creek homestead, he can't contain his anger.

The mountainside, part of the Beaufort range that hems the eastern side of Alberni Valley, was logged in 2005 by TimberWest Forest, which owns the land.

The logging was done by a contractor, and the timber was mostly exported.

Winter rains have since sent six debris flows down the mountainside, spreading destruction over the eastern portion of his 66-hectare homestead site, says Crowley, a contract logger. From his home, a washed-out stream bed halfway up the logged slope is plainly visible. There is no sign of a riparian zone of trees to protect the stream.

Logging in the Beauforts has put sharp focus on an issue in this resource town that many residents see as the direct

result of the seismic changes that have shaken the coastal forest industry. The clearcut slopes offer a visible reminder of just how much control over their own lives they have lost.

The forests around Port Alberni, both private and public, were at one time dedicated to manufacturing pulp, paper and lumber at plants in the central Vancouver Island town.

Today, those forests are fragmented by lines drawn on maps, and timber that once all flowed to a central point now travels outside the valley, leaving unemployment in its wake.

Different regulations are in place on the private lands, creating a perception in the community that public interests are not being protected, according to a report by Macauley and Associates commissioned by the government and released last June.

"The concern is that standards prescribed are not sufficiently developed to permit effective enforcement," says the report. It takes no side on whether the perceptions are accurate.

The timing of TimberWest's logging couldn't have been worse. The Beaufort

Fragmentation of timberlands has changed 'sustainability' of forests

From OI

lands have been managed as private lands for over 100 years. But when the slope above Crowley's land was logged in 2005, changes taking effect on Crown lands and on other private lands were disrupting logs flows and costing workers their jobs.

Then, one of the worst storms in memory hit B.C. in November 2006. Port Alberni was right in its path. Saturated soils gave way on logged and unlogged slopes, on Crown and private lands. Another series of debris flows came down onto Crowley's property.

The highly visible logging, the water turbidity caused by the debris flows, and the exporting of the timber fused in people's minds, and became a lightening rod for public discontent.

"There used to be one forest under one law," said Keith Wyton, of the Save Our Valley Alliance, a coalition of community groups aimed at restoring Port Alberni's forestry legacy. "What we are seeing now is the breakup of the sustainable-yield model that has governed our forests."

The alliance has galvanized public opinion around three local issues: Log exports, water quality, and the long-term sustainable use of the surrounding forest lands. The damage to Crowley's land and the sediment that made its way into local water supplies seemed to capture all three issues in one event.

■ However, perceptions that TimberWest's logging practices were to blame for the debris flows are not correct, said Stuart Macpherson, executive director of the private-managed forest land council. Winter storms over the last two years have caused debris flows regardless of who owns the land.

"What people are ignoring is that there were many instances on Crown lands of flooding and debris flows."

Nevertheless, the council introduced changes to its regulatory framework effective Sept. 1 to improve environmental standards on private forest lands throughout the province, including:

■ Protection of water quality upstream from all licensed waterworks intakes, not just those located in a community watershed.

■ Water quality protection parallel to requirements on Crown land.

■ Notifying water users where operations are in close proximity to licensed waterworks.

■ Increased riparian protection requirements to protect water quality and fish habitat.

Macpherson said the changes were incorporated as a result of the council's own internal auditing and review processes. The Port Alberni activists and recommendations in the Macauley report that regulatory standards on private lands be enhanced were not factors, he said.

TimberWest was the first company to come under fire for accelerating logging on its private lands and exporting much of the timber. Others have followed suit, however, and now locals patrol clearcuts deep up the Ash River Valley north of Port Alberni, where a second private landowner, Island Timberlands is taking out second-growth timber and exporting most of the logs.

Logging on the scale Island Timberlands is conducting is bound to affect water quality downstream, says Jack Klock, during a tour of a kilometre-long clearcut on Island Timberlands property.

"For 75 years, people have been drawing their water here and [they] never had a problem until now," he said.

At the heart of the anger being directed at the private landowners by people like Klock is the fact that Port Alberni is ringed by private lands that were logged more than a generation ago as part of a sustainable forest policy.

■ Sustainable forestry is still a cornerpost of provincial policy, but fragmentation of timberlands has changed timber profiles and age classes.

Private lands, owned at the time by MacMillan Bloedel, along with the forest giant's Crown tenures, were incorporated in one management unit known as Tree Farm Licence 44. The entire TFL was subject to provincial forestry regulations.

TFL 44 supplied MacMillan Bloedel's Alberni sawmills and pulp and paper mill with plenty of timber, and the plan was to log it from east to west. By the time the West Coast lands were logged, timber around Port Alberni would be mature again and the cycle would begin all over.

It was, Wyton says, one forest, whether private or public. And one law governed it.

Today, that forest has been cut into pieces, some going into parks and some changing hands through corporate re-structuring. The private lands have been amalgamated under two pure-play companies, TimberWest Forest and Island Timberlands.

Both companies have found they can gain the maximum return by exporting logs. And they have accelerated the rate of cut by adopting a harvesting model that bases harvest rotations on an economic schedule, rather than on biological maturity.

As timber allocations have changed, so too has investment by the large forest companies' operating plants. The B.C. forest industry as a whole had a

negative return on capital employed of 1.8 per cent in 2006. The coast was the worst-performing sector. No longer making a return on their capital employed, companies say they cannot attract investor interest.

The low return is a driving force behind the corporate restructuring says Rick Jeffery, CEO of the Coast Forest Products Association.

You can see what's happening in the world. It all has to do with global markets. . . . The company used to tell us: 'We will look after you from cradle to grave.' It had buses to pick you up at the doorstep and take you to work.

KEN McRAE

Port Alberni mayor, on the long-gone days of working for operations such as MacMillan Bloedel



It's not just logging and sawmilling companies that are changing the way they operate. At Catalyst Paper, which operates the pulp and paper mill once owned by MacMillan Bloedel, 185 workers are being laid off gradually after the company shut down down one of its two remaining paper machines at the end of August.

“Offshore paper machines are moving product into what has historically been our market and they are doing it at a reduced cost,” says Catalyst's director of human resources, Vern

Phillips, explaining the issues the company faces.

The Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, which represents the mill's remaining 200-plus workers, sees the issue as a lack of investment to upgrade the plant's aging equipment. The company is seeking concessions from workers and reduced taxes from the town.

Pete Rayburn, president of the mill maintenance workers' local, says the union has offered everything it can, short of tearing up the collective agreement. With only one machine left, he says there is little optimism left among workers that the company is serious about committing new money even if it gets the concessions it is seeking.

Rayburn, a 30-year veteran of the mill, received a layoff notice himself when Catalyst announced the paper machine was going down.

“I've raised my family here. My roots are here, I'm in that 55-year-old age bracket, so what do I do?,” Rayburn says as he stands outside the paper mill.

At the same time the old industry is shrinking, a new, smaller, more locally controlled one taking its place.

Players with local roots, like the Coulson Group of companies, are expected to play a larger role in the town's future economic development, says Port Alberni Mayor Ken McRae.

The son of a logging contractor, Coulson president Wayne Coulson has diversified his business interests as the forest industry has changed.

“We have had to create our own independence within the industry, he says in an interview.

His Coulson Group was founded on the forestry business — which includes logging, sawmilling, and lumber remanufacturing operations.

The last remaining two Martin Mars water bombers, Port Alberni icons, were the division's latest acquisition.

Coulson also runs a heli-leasing business, with five giant Sikorsky helicopters. The third business, which is starting up this month, is a casino-restaurant-microbrewery complex just off Highway 4 that he developed in conjunction with local charities. He is counting on drawing into the rain-forest-themed complex some of the 1.4 million tourists who pass through the town every year on their way to Pacific Rim National Park.

“If we are going to be in this business, we are going to be proud of it,” he says of the complex, which he financed to the tune of \$7.2 million in exchange for a share of the casino profits.

But forestry is still Coulson's roots. Coulson Forest Products has signed contracts with first nations in Clayoquot Sound and is working on becoming eco-certified. It is now the town's second-largest employer, behind only Western Forest Products, with two mills and timber resources on the Island's west coast. Catalyst Paper is third.

“You can see what's happening in the world,” says McRae of Catalyst's decision to downsize while smaller operators look for opportunities to grow. “It all has to do with global markets.

“The company used to tell us: ‘We will look after you from cradle to grave.’ It had buses to pick you up at the doorstep and take you to work,” he says of the long-gone MacMillan Bloedel days.

“But is the forest industry finished? No, I think it is coming full-circle with homegrown companies like Coulson and with timber going to first nations,” McRae says.

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