



Getting a jump on beetle wood

The mountain pine beetle scourge was late in hitting the Smithers area in west central B.C., but the Wetzin'kwa Community Forest has been acting quickly to harvest and utilize as much of the infected wood as possible

By Jim Stirling

Up behind Hudson Bay Mountain in the Wetzin'kwa Community Forest, harvesting beetle-infected lodgepole pine stands is gradually gathering momentum.

The beetle scourge was relatively late to hit the Smithers region of west central British Columbia and its mixed species forest, a forest that is a transition between the interior and coastal forest types. But the infestation has now hit with a vengeance.

The community forest's directors have been commendably quick off the mark to launch a planned offensive to harvest and utilize as much of the infected wood as it can while it retains sawlog values.

An important step in the campaign was to seek an uplift in the Wetzin'kwa Community Forest's allowable annual cut from its original 30,000 cubic metres. The Skeena Stikine Forest District office in Smithers responded positively, permitting an additional 65,000 cubic metres annually for the next five years. At that time, the beetle situation will be re-analyzed.

The increased AAC will better allow regional loggers the opportunity to have an impact on the infestation, points out Bill Golding, the community forest's general manager and partner/operations manager with Silvicon Services Inc. Silvicon is a forestry consulting firm, based in Smithers.

The 31,000 hectare Wetzin'kwa Community Forest lies between Telkwa, east of Smithers, and Moricetown in the west. Golding estimates lodgepole pine comprises about 25 per cent of the community forest and occupies about the same percentage of its area. That amounts to about 1.7 million cubic metres of pine.

He reports the pockets of beetle infestation had been generally uneven until a surge in 2010, reinforcing the necessity for a quick response. Consequently, the pine forests are in various stages of infestation, including green attack.

The community forest and its loggers have a sporting chance to harvest a good percentage of the pine, regenerate the area and prevent a repeat of the sea of dead grey trees in regions to the east and south. Removing the dead and dying pine also helps reduce interface wildfire risk.

While there is a sense of urgency to salvage the infected pine, Golding says care during the process is encouraged to protect the forest understory. It represents the start of a new forest and helps move away from creating a monoculture that can result from large-scale clear cutting and which contributed to the severity of the beetle infestation in the B.C. interior.

Hudson Bay Mountain is the signature backdrop to Smithers and a Mecca for outdoor sport and recreation enthusiasts year



around. It seems every Smithereen (resident of Smithers) is involved in and passionate about the outdoors and enjoys the wealth of opportunities on their doorstep.

Rationalizing those considerations with other interest groups sounds like a daunting challenge. But the community forest's board of directors have so far stickhandled the challenges with aplomb.

The Hudson Bay ski hill developments are not part of the community forest and they set aside the existing network of ski, hiking and cycling trails, explains Golding.

Local groups and organizations were studiously canvassed and consulted before any activity took place within the community forest boundaries. Open communications continue to be encouraged and practiced. "We have more flexibility to be creative in a community forest," observes Golding.

The Wetzin'kwa Community Forest was formed in 2007. "But it was 10 years in the making with people like (chair) Dean Daly doing the early legwork," says Golding. Critical seed money of \$250,000 was donated to create a community forest by Dean Shaw, a well-respected regional lumberman who at the time owned Newpro (Northern Engineered Wood Products Inc.), a quality particleboard manufacturer located in Smithers.

The community forest's present structure represents the Town of Smithers and the Village of Telkwa. "The board decided the Office of the Wetsuwet'en would share in any profits generated by the forest with Smithers and Telkwa," continues Golding.

A quarter of any profit is redistributed back into the region through two grant programs: proposals from the community and stewardship enhancement projects on the community forest land base.

As befits a community forest, all the operational functions are regionally sourced where possible. The area has a solid core of forest industry related expertise. Management functions and layout work are performed locally as are the log harvesting, trucking and seedling planting functions.

Sawlogs from the community forest are usually marketed to the highest bidder.

Golding says the forest's board is investigating practical ways to making community forest wood available to local value added producers.

Sharing the resource's bounty is at the root of the community forest concept and a constant consideration with the Wetzin'kwa group.