



Planning for future forests

One of British Columbia's smallest community forests—the Harrop Procter Community Forest in the province's Kootenay Region—is planning for the future with optimism, being close to receiving a 25-year renewable licence.

By Paul MacDonald

At a time when the business approach in the forest industry seems to be “big is beautiful”—with mega mergers among major forest companies and mega-sized sawmills—Dave Johnson and his colleagues involved with the Harrop Procter Community Forest in British Columbia believe that small can be pretty nice, too. “We like to think that being smaller is okay, because we’re pretty small,” says Johnson, chair of the Harrop Procter Community Forest (HPCF), sitting in the Old Procter Schoolhouse that serves as the community forest’s modest office. The school is, as locals like to say, in the heart of Procter’s bustling one-block long
downtown.

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in the province. But just as important as the timber that comes with the community forest is the control the community now has over its watershed, and what goes on within that watershed.

This is an area of heightened interest in BC. At one point this past summer, the Sunshine Coast Regional District—north of Vancouver—ordered forest company Western Forest Products to stop logging and building road in the Chapman Creek Watershed. Whether in fact regional district governments in BC have the right to order a halt to logging activities, it's clear that local governments and organizations—and residents—are now more concerned about what's going on in their watersheds. That's initially what motivated the folks in the community of Harrop Procter.

Johnson noted that when HPCF was first set up—as one of seven pilot community forests in BC—there were ambitious plans for timber products, as well as non-timber products from the community forest. After realizing that it's best to focus on a few projects, rather than a lot, things now look to be moving ahead with the forest.

“We've let a lot of the projects that we started out with go,” says Johnson. “There were too many things going on and we were going in too many different directions when we first started the community forest. Our focus now is on managing the watershed, forestry and getting value-added from our timber.” In terms of a forest management approach, HPCF is very much on the green edge. This sets it apart from many other community forests in BC, which generally follow standard forestry and harvesting models, a path the forest industry itself takes.



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The HPCF concept involves In fact, to get things kick-started, they are going above their AAC—which is set at a very modest 2,600 cubic metres. The cut level will be reduced going forward. “Our cut is very low, and that was our decision. If we were to depend strictly on log sales, it would not be enough—you can't get much scale with that volume of cut. That's why there is a value-added component and why it is important. Looking at the timber profile, cedar seems to be where it's at for us, with a secondary opportunity in the timber framing market.”

In the past, HPCF has struggled with a five-year tenure, which Johnson says is “a blink of an eye in terms of operating a forest operation, never mind in the lifetime of a forest.”

The Ministry of Forests has now offered Harrop Procter a 25-year renewable licence, and they are in the last stages of negotiating the agreement of that licence. “The implications of a 25-year tenure are huge in terms of planning, not to mention the ability to raise capital if and when it's required,” says Johnson. “We can now plan our future logging and management of the forest with more confidence and expectations of success. We are looking forward to the coming years with a good deal of optimism in terms of continued stewardship of the forest by the community.”

Johnson notes that the forest they work with contains the typical “Kootenay Mix” of the region, which includes just about every species going in the province—Douglas fir, lodgepole pine, birch, aspen, larch, hemlock and balsam fir, in varying percentages depending on the stand.

“It's easy to sell some species, such as cedar, and with other species, such as pine, less easy.”

A complication these days is the rise of the mountain pine beetle, in a big way. An estimated 25 per cent of the HPCF forest is made up of lodgepole pine, which is only too susceptible to the mountain pine beetle.

“It's moving through the area—we're one of the last places to get it. We're the least red area on the whole west arm of Kootenay Lake,” says Erik Leslie, HPCF's forest manager, pointing to a forestry map showing the progress, if you can call it that, of the beetle.

The beetle is at what is described by Leslie as an incipient level right now, meaning that the HPCF has a bit more time to develop a strategy—but not a lot of time. Going forward, they will

harvest beetle-affected pine wherever possible. But much of it—especially because of the community forest’s rudimentary road system—is just plain inaccessible.

“We have to take a hard look at accessing that pine. Is it really worth it?” says Leslie. In the shorter term, the community forest will be carrying out what Leslie terms triage, taking beetle trees out after affected areas have been assessed. A careful overall long-term assessment will be done in the near future, based on a new forest inventory that is currently being undertaken.

The assessment is still going to recommend a modest cut for HPCF. Johnson notes that the community forest harvest will never be large—that was not their intention in setting it up in the first place. The forest will, however, be managed locally, and that was one of their goals. “We are doing it on our terms, with protection of the watershed as the primary goal.”

But they are also gaining control over a very valuable local resource, the timber, and how it will be managed.

At one time, British Columbia’s Ministry of Forests had control over where timber was processed—wherever possible, it was milled in the area where it was cut. But that was done away with as part of a forestry reform package.

“It’s easy to see that communities are concerned about that,” says Johnson. “Wood can now be cut near a community and then trucked 100 kilometres to a sawmill in another town.”

Local control and management, and a big push on value add, could result in better management of the resource, and more jobs for communities, he says. “There are far more jobs per cubic metre in value-added than you’ll find in those huge mills that cut millions of board feet a day.”

Johnson said that he and the other locals who are involved have a sense of achievement and satisfaction with the community forest. “We believe we are doing the right thing, and by and large, we think the community supports what we are doing. People here want to have clean water and make use of all the aspects of the forest.”

Small sawmilling: finding the right market fit

Dave Johnson focuses on value-added with his family’s own small sawmilling operation, Mill Creek Enterprises, which he operates with his son, Kevin. Mill Creek was set up before the Harrop Procter Community Forest was established, while Johnson was still working for the Nelson Police Department (he’s now retired from that job).

Using a Cutting Edge portable sawmill with a D & L two-saw band edger (the edger is a recent addition), they focus on producing bigger pieces.

“We can’t compete with the large mills in the 2x4 market. I tell people that if they want 2x4s from us, they’ll have to pay a decent price, but they’re going to get a bigger piece of wood, like 1-3/4x4.”

Normally, however, the only time they’ll cut 2x4s is when they come off sidecuts for another job. It’s really all about economics. “An 8x8 will give us up to \$1.50 a board foot, but the 2x4s will give us 65 or 70 cents a board foot, if that. We leave our wood in log form as long as possible and cut to order.”

He adds that it’s almost worthwhile to do cedar 2x4s, but with pine, he waits for 6x6 orders. “Four by fours in pine can work, too, because it involves using a piece of the log that can’t be

used for much else, and you get a decent price for it. In this business, you really have to find the market that fits with what you are doing.”