



Cutting the wildfire risk

Government and industry need to take a different look at how to manage the forest to reduce its capacity to support catastrophic wildfires, says the head of the Western Silviculture Contractors' Association.

By Jim Stirling

Everything is in place. All the required ingredients for catastrophic wildfires are just waiting for an ignition that appears just a matter of time. As a result, the safety of communities and infrastructure along with the forest resource and the raw material to sustain the British Columbia Interior forest industry are in real jeopardy.

“We think catastrophic wildfire is going to be a significant factor for shaping the forest,” declared Jon Betts, executive director of the Western Silviculture Contractors' Association (WSCA). It's one reason why the association hosted the Western Wildfire Conference in Kelowna, B.C. in April. It brought together speakers with a range of perspectives on the subject from as far away as Australia. B.C. has its own recent reminder of the risks to the wildland/urban interface with the firestorms of 2003. They destroyed 334 homes and caused 45,000 people in the B.C. Interior to evacuate their properties.

Today, there are many more standing dead trees resulting from the mountain pine beetle epidemic just awaiting the right triggers. And a warming climate punctuated by weather behaviour extremes exacerbates a volatile scenario.

“We need to look at ways we can modify or intervene on a landscape level to reduce its capacity to support catastrophic wildfires,” added Betts. “We think we should look first to communities and managing the fireheds around them.” And that means safeguarding more than a couple of kilometres from the closest subdivision: sparks and debris can travel much further than that given the right circumstances, he added.

Similarly, the landscape management concept is not just about industry but about all the values and diversity associated with a healthy forest. “It's about a sense of modifying and working with the landscape that gives all of our interests a better chance against wildfire,” added Betts.

The provincial Ministry of Forests, Lands & Natural Resource Operations is thinking along similar broader forest management lines and objectives with a concept it calls Type 4 Silviculture. It moves beyond the normal replanting considerations and expands them to include wildfire and forest fuel management considerations, ecosystem restoration and climate change ramifications.

Several interior Timber Supply Areas (TSA's) have Type 4 plans in development including those from Prince George to the south Cariboo, the Okanagan TSA and the Lakes and Morice regions to the west of Prince George.

In the Nadina and Okanagan-Shuswap forest districts, pilot projects are planned to test the wildfire specifications emerging from the Type 4 Silviculture approach. The more expansive landscape perspective proposed by Type 4 Silviculture is viewed as a positive development by the Western Silviculture Contractors' Association. “As I understand



it, Type 4 Silviculture is the first tentative move in the right direction,” said Betts. “It’s beginning to consider wildfire and other landscape disturbances.” Type 4 allows them to expand their strategic and critical planning to include a range of values, he added. “Some forward thinking licencees will see some value in thinking in the longer term and beyond the current AAC.”

Meanwhile, Western Silviculture Contractors’ Association member companies are gearing up for what looks like a promising work year ahead. “Based on sowing request data—which is fairly reliable—we’re looking to a planting of 241 million seedlings during the spring, summer and fall seasons,” reported Betts. That would represent an increase from 238 million in 2012 and 220 million and 170 million in the preceding years. “We are looking at what’s driving that demand,” said Betts. One theory is the forest industry is making up for tough recent times when bare minimum replanting requirements were the necessary order of the day. “We don’t know if replanting will stay at this level—but we’re glad of it.”

Betts said margins remain tight for silviculture contractors with rising costs, headed by fuel, training and recruitment. The recruitment aspect, as with so many other sectors of the forest industry, is becoming a growing issue in the silviculture industry. “We are seeing from our surveys and exit polls with workers and clients that our skilled worker market is operating pretty much at full capacity,” explained Betts. “We still get plenty of applicants but you can’t populate the industry with unskilled workers.”

Silviculture contractors traditionally hire by word of mouth, which in a sense is a type of pre-filtering of applicants, he noted. “But you still have to retain the skilled silviculture workers, the good supervisors and project mentors.”

The WSCA is working with the federally-run Labour Market Partnership to help research the work force and find better ways to recruit and retain the type of workforce the sector needs. Betts said worker reasons for opting for silviculture work range from “the poetic to the pragmatic.”

In the meantime, the course the silviculture sector needs to chart is clear, he said. “We need to be more proactive and start marketing our industry on a broader level to keep the good workers we have and attract new young Canadians,” summarized Betts.