



Greenpeace should be red-faced over screw-up

By Jim Stirling

Credibility is hard earned but easily damaged.

Consider the example offered by Resolute Forest Products Inc and Greenpeace Canada. The environmental lobby group took the Montreal-based pulp and paper manufacturer to task for violating the Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement (CBFA). But it turns out Greenpeace was wrong and Resolute was innocent of the charges levelled against it.

The CBFA was a three-year deal signed in 2010 by 21 forest companies including Resolute and nine environmental groups, including Greenpeace. One of the objectives of the CBFA was to come to an agreement on which areas of boreal forest merit permanent exclusion from any log harvesting activity.

By way of background, the boreal forest helps define the Canadian landscape. It occupies 307 million hectares which is around 77 per cent of Canada's forests and woodlands.

The boreal forest is present in parts of all Canadian provinces and territories with the exceptions of Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. The task of figuring out which parts of the boreal forest should be protected is mammoth and rationalizing opposing agendas a re-definition of compromise and conciliation.

But Greenpeace believed Resolute had contravened the CBFA and had marshalled its "evidence" to prove it. And last December, to emphasize its protest, Greenpeace withdrew from participation in the CBFA.

Resolute took umbrage at Greenpeace's accusations and set about clearing its reputation."Some of the things that Greenpeace said were so outrageous," retorted Seth Kursman, Resolute's vice-president of communications, sustainability and government affairs in press reports.

"We have stood steadfast in our position that Resolute has been aligned with the word and spirit of the CBFA. We would not allow the deceptive accusations and misinformation to stand."

Greenpeace's evidence of Resolute's malfeasance emanated from operating areas west and north of Chicoutimi, Quebec. Greenpeace pointed to newly built roads as an example of Resolute's alleged trespass.

Resolute responded by pointing out the road section in question was built by the Quebec Ministry of Natural Resources for reforestation purposes. Greenpeace also offered a couple of videos to condemn Resolute. One showed a damaged forest area and the other a forest machine purportedly causing damage. Resolute's investigation revealed the first video was of a wooded property damaged by fire. The second one allegedly showing a machine damaging the boreal forest was, in fact, reforestation activity.

When confronted with reality, Greenpeace was shamed into admitting its allegations against Resolute were groundless.

"Resolute challenged our investigation," said Stephanie Goodwin, from Greenpeace's Vancouver office. "Our analysis was based on the use of an incomplete map that lacked a data layer."

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Greenpeace tried to make the best out of what should have been its embarrassment by asserting that backing away from its earlier position proved Greenpeace pays attention to views contrary to its own. But the organization will continue its withdrawal from membership in the CBFA because, said Greenpeace, it has continuing concerns about logging in sensitive areas.

The entire unfortunate episode could and should have been handled more honestly and professionally by Greenpeace.

For a start, when the organization realized it had wrongly accused Resolute of violating the CBFA, it should have come clean. A simple, sincere apology can work wonders. Greenpeace screwed up but wouldn't admit it.

Refusing to participate in the current or presumably any future incarnation of the CBFA is not just petulant, it represents a suspect strategy. If Greenpeace is truly committed to preserving its vision for the future of Canada's boreal forests, it should be an active participant in any management decisions affecting them. Greenpeace may not like the CBFA's terms of reference, its modus operandi or much about it all. But it makes sense to have some of its focus and potential influence from within the process. Tilting solely at windmills is a pretty questionable strategy these days.

But the truly frightening aspect of the whole unfortunate situation was Greenpeace's admission that its analysis of the Resolute situation was based on the use of a map that lacked a data level. Was no-one checking what was going on and reviewing the material before the zeal to vilify Resolute took over? Greenpeace is a huge, well funded, international and successful special interest organization. It has many resources at its disposal. But using a map that lacked a data layer somehow missed their scrutiny.

If that was indeed what happened, this huge, well-funded, international and successful special interest organization should do some serious internal soul searching. The devils' advocate stance has it that the map with the missing data layer was simply a red herring. And not an especially convincing one in the circumstances. Perhaps the really uncharitable might further suggest that the whole situation was akin to not letting the facts get in the way of a good story.

There's an interesting sidebar to the whole scenario. How come Greenpeace's forest industry experts couldn't recognize a property burned by fire or a site being prepared for reforestation when they saw those images on the videos?

Credibility is indeed hard earned and that is something Greenpeace would certainly understand, having achieved a measure of the commodity by pursuing its causes through the years. And it makes it all the harder to understand why that credibility was so casually jeopardized.