



## Departure of de la Roche leaves big shoes to fill

By Tony Kryzanowski

“Keep it real.”

Those three words could summarize the career of the recently retired president and CEO of FPInnovations, Dr. Ian de la Roche, who has capped off over 30 years in research, strategic planning and the creation of partnerships between government and industry.

An outstanding leader in the field of forestry R & D, his successor will have some big shoes to fill in terms of providing direction at this critical time for the industry.

What de la Roche offered during his tenure, first as president of Forintek Canada Corp and later as president of FPInnovations, was that he was a knowledgeable and dedicated industry promoter.

Industry, especially the solid wood sector where he spent most of his time, benefited greatly from his energy and uncanny ability to weave business and government into functional partnerships. He surrounded himself with equally capable and energetic individuals who--like him--were rarely satisfied with the status quo, were willing to push the boundaries, and were not terribly interested in research done for its own sake.

Furthermore, he attracted many of the best and brightest scientific minds through his connections with various universities and technical institutes. Many of the institute's scientists and technologists are among the elite within their particular fields of expertise and are frequently sought after to present at conferences and symposia around the globe.

As a scientist himself, de la Roche urged employees to back product and technology claims with quality scientific evidence, understanding that this reputation for unbiased research was also the doorway to building international markets. Instilling that philosophy was particularly helpful for opening new market opportunities in Asia, for expanding the market for softwood lumber in Japan, and more recently, for helping the Chinese government write a building code that opens doors to more North American wood products being used for building construction in China in the future.

de la Roche respected the financial contributions made by institute members and had a singular focus on delivering value back to members with ideas and solutions that delivered tangible results, no matter if the member was a mom-and-pop sawmill or a major multinational. And in return, he earned the respect of industry members.

He was a good listener who took direction from the Board of Directors very seriously, and made every attempt to deliver strategic plans that responded to the direction given. However, he was equally adept at pointing out shortcomings and the consequences of certain actions. For example, he helped to ensure that all members were aware of the potential market consequences of the mountain pine beetle epidemic, and masterfully offered the technical muscle at Forintek to help dispel many of the concerns about beetle wood through scientific investigation. Industry members were also provided with many strategies to maximize value recovery from this resource.

During his watch, significant market gains were also achieved through investments made in research related to the de-



velopment, manufacturing and commercialization of such products as oriented strand board, medium density fibreboard, laminated veneer lumber, and other new building products and systems.

de la Roche was particularly skillful in leveraging membership dollars against other opportunities, to raise more research money through developing partnerships with other institutions and other national or international research institutes, as well as expanding direct contract services to members.

During his tenure, Forintek became a truly national organization, with many provincial governments joining or renewing their memberships. More recently, membership was expanded to include secondary wood product manufacturers with the focus again placed squarely on providing value with the acquisition of federal and provincial funding for the “Value-to-Wood” program. This included establishing a network of industry advisors at strategic locations across Canada. There are many companies that owe their very survival today to the information provided through this program.

Canada’s forestry sector has truly lost one of its champions. Without a doubt, de la Roche was the right person, in the right place, at the right time.

The question now is whether FPInnovations will continue to focus on practical solutions, or will it diminish into a pie-in-the-sky research mill for career academics? That is the major challenge facing the FPInnovations board and new President and CEO, Pierre Lapointe.

Most recently, Lapointe was CEO of the Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS) for 10 years. INRS is a research university comprised of a network of four research centres recognized internationally for their activities in four major areas: natural resources, nanotechnologies, biomedical and applied social sciences.

Lapointe also has experience initiating numerous agreements and partnerships with the global scientific community, while taking an integrated development approach to international research and training. The INRS now has some 30 partnerships in place with institutions in 15 countries.

Hopefully, Ian de la Roche’s last words to Lapointe on his last day were, “Pierre, keep it real.”