

GROWING A NEW FOREST INDUSTRY

What do you do if wood markets crash in the midst of an environmental disaster? If you're the person in charge of BC's forest ministry you get to work on new opportunities.

When Pat Bell talks about embracing new career opportunities, he draws on personal experience. Currently heading his third Ministry since being elected, the Forest Minister pursued success in diverse fields before entering government. A trained educator, he spent part of his career as a district manager for Wendy's Restaurants before starting a successful logging business.

Bell sat down to talk to *Landscapes* about changes underway in BC forestry, opportunities on the horizon and the pride he has in the workers in BC's forest sector.

He dismisses chatter about forestry being a sunset industry. "We are on the edge of a brand new industry," says Bell, "one that is going to add significant new product lines and penetrate new markets." He draws a comparison to the period prior to the advent of the pulp industry 50 years ago. He describes it as a time when "huge slabs of spruce and fir would pile up and every few weeks someone would pour a little diesel fuel on them and strike a match." Adds Bell, "At some point, someone looked at it and realized it didn't make any sense. So the pulp industry emerged as a means of extracting greater value."

He sees a parallel with the move towards green energy resulting in part from people looking for value in residual logging material. "In 2008, we produced about 1.8 million tons of wood pellets in what is the fastest growing segment of our forest industry," he notes. Bell enthuses about the fact that 90 per cent of that product was exported with the majority going to Scandinavia. Asked what is driving that opportunity he suggests that Europeans have "a far more advanced green economy," putting the gap in carbon emissions management at six or seven years. But

Bell is anything but complacent. He says BC is closing that green gap at an accelerated pace.

He also sees a bullish future in silviculture, everything from research to tree planting. Bell is careful to note that he is not being critical of past industry practices to put something back. The practices at the time "met the standards

of the day" as set by public policy. He talks about moving to a regime of managing stands to maximum potential. "One of our focuses in the

Ministry right now is looking at how we can have a more active and aggressive approach to growing on the land base," says Bell. He sees robust career potential in this new approach.

Bell is concerned about the current downturn but not deterred. "There is nothing particularly new here although the depth of the cycle is certainly worse than previous ones," he says. The response strategy he supports is well underway. He talks about moving away from the traditional hunker down and hope approach of waiting for a rebound in the US housing market. Instead, he is spearheading a two-track strategy involving growth in the Chinese market as well as promoting wood in commercial institutional construction.

The experience in the Chinese market has been a two-way education. "When we first went into China, we thought that if they would just build houses out of wood, everything would be fine," he recalls. But with a greater understanding of China's need for density, BC has developed prototypes for six story buildings, made of wood, that conform to China's building codes. Wood is also displacing steel in Chinese construction applications thanks to BC marketing efforts.

With forest fire season approaching, Bell's thoughts turn to the need for vigilance and personal responsibility. While proud of BC's record in fire fighting ("People don't realize that BC is a world leader in forest fire management," he notes) Bell warns that government alone can't micromanage every risk. He cautions people living in interface zones, where the forest borders human settlements, to take proactive and creative measures under their control. "Government by itself cannot analyze every situation," he states. Ever the optimist, Bell sees opportunities for economic return in the task of cleaning underbrush for fire protection. He speaks about a company in his riding that collected logging debris and sold it to a pellet company with customers in Sweden.

The story reflects Bell's abhorrence of waste. "One of the things that used to drive me nuts when I logged during the 90s was to see the waste that was left behind in the bush," he recalls.

He hasn't changed his views on waste. That's why rather than wasting time lamenting the current industry downturn he is pushing for changes that will create unprecedented market opportunities and jobs to match. But he gives the credit to Ministry staff. "We have a great team of people who understand that the industry is more challenged today than it as ever been. They are not happy about it. They want to change it. They will be successful."

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