

Unsettled Times Provide Opportunity for Forest Professionals to Step Up

BC's forest sector is undergoing a momentous change, buffeted by a combination of policy reform, economic uncertainty, new models of shared governance, shifting markets, climate impacts, workforce demographics, and evolving public expectations. This moment feels different than previous market downturns and it's increasingly obvious there will be no return to "business as usual." Clearly, a transformation in forestry is underway, some of it overdue, some daunting, and some full of possibility.

In moments like this, certainty is elusive. Information floods in while the signals that matter are often buried beneath speculation, opinion, and outright misinformation. It is easy to get stuck in the 'muddiness' of it all and hope someone else will bring clarity and provide a clear and obvious path forward.

The policy choices, management decisions, planning assumptions, and stewardship priorities made today will shape BC forests and forest sector for decades. Who will lead in making those decisions? How will we prevent the strong desire to place all the focus on urgent short-term fixes from overshadowing the important and the need for improving our long-term potential?

This is a moment fit for forest professionals.

Our professional code is designed for guiding us in times like these. It requires forest professionals to have independence, objectivity, and transparency in distinguishing facts from assumptions and opinions. It demands rigorous conflict-of-interest management and due diligence anchored in law, science, and defensible reasoning. Our knowledge ensures competence in solutions, and our forest stewardship standard provides a north star to consider, balance, and manage for the long-term health and resilience of the forests we manage on behalf of all people living in British Columbia.

Guided by conduct and competence standards, every forest professional has a role in shaping BC's forest future. Some will lead early; others will contribute as solutions take shape. The work is already underway, with many forest professionals guiding practical, responsible, solution-oriented paths forward. Here are some examples:

Forest Management Policy Framework. The Provincial Forestry Advisory Council, co-chaired by two registered forest professionals, is advising government on how to advance forest stewardship in ways that support communities, workers, ecosystems, and the wood products industry. The council released an interim report in October that highlighted three themes it was examining in depth:

- Exploring steps, policies, and supports to transition to area-based management;
- Reflecting on necessary new decision-making models including considering who must be at the table and which governance structures will ensure accountability; and
- Evolving forest management practices to address concerns and reduce risks related to climate change such as pests, disease, and catastrophic fire.

The council's recommendations will be released at year-end and insights will be shared at our annual conference, alongside many other sessions on policy evolution and the future of forestry.

Forest Economics. BC's forest industry is facing harsh economic realities. Market volatility, increased US duties, and structural pressures have hit the forest industry hard. Communities feel the ripple effects, and financial constraints shapes decisions. Tight margins can create pressure to cut corners, making sound professional judgment more important than ever. This is precisely when the leadership and integrity of forest professionals matter most.

Forest professionals, whether in senior leadership roles or on-the-ground operations, serve as a critical counterweight within organizations, helping ensure long-term stewardship of forests is balanced against short-term economic pressures. Recognizing this, we took an important step this fall when Forest Professionals BC formalized a previously undefined area of professional practice: *Professional Forestry Leadership*. This formalization of a practice area in leadership affirms for forest professionals and the public alike that forest management requires more than technical expertise; it demands ethical judgment, strategic foresight, and public accountability, all grounded in a comprehensive understanding of forestry.

Changing Climate and Forests. Among other impacts of a changing climate, catastrophic wildfire has and continues to impact the province's vast forest resource, threaten the safety of communities and infrastructure, destroy culturally and ecologically important forest areas, emit high levels of carbon emissions, and impact the livelihood of communities and industries who rely on the forest. The need for regulated professional expertise and skilled practitioners to help manage our forests for wildfire, in addition to the services of the BC Wildfire Service, is becoming increasingly crucial. This was the driver behind the establishment of a joint practice panel between Forest Professionals BC and the BC Wildfire Service, supported in part by a \$620,000 grant from the Ministry of Forests. The joint panel, made up of subject matter experts and leaders, has already begun charting a path forward with the development and release in 2025 of standards of competence for the three professional forestry practice areas related to wildland fire.

As the economic, political, and ecological landscape shifts around us, forest professionals are the ones with the expertise and training, the enforceable standards, and the ethical foundation to help navigate uncertainty and build a resilient future for BC's forests and the public who rely on them.

There's no denying this is hard work and it will be difficult to navigate some of the challenges ahead. But challenges can also be opportunities and I believe now is not the time for forest professionals to shy away; rather it's a time for us to step in. ✎

