



Managing the wildfire hazard could help bioenergy industries

B.C.'s policy for the treatment of the wildfire hazard in the wildland-urban interface inadvertently pits communities against forest companies. But a solution is available through a cooperative arrangement which could also help the development of bioenergy industries.

By Robert W. Gray

The now-famous 2003 wildfire season in British Columbia, which resulted in three firefighter fatalities, the evacuation of 45,000 people, the loss of over 350 homes and businesses, and costs exceeding \$700 million to suppress, was fueled by a combination of hot, dry weather and excessive accumulations of dead material in the forest.

No other fire season in B.C.'s recent past has done as much physical, financial and psychological damage as the 2003 fire season.

The result of the 2003 "firestorms" was a series of recommendations for changes to wildfire and fuels management as set out in the Filmon Report—a report commissioned by then-B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell and written by Gary Filmon, the former premier of Manitoba, and a team of fire experts. Out of the report came recommendations for community involvement in fire hazard reduction planning, suggested changes to tenures and licensing that would encourage hazardous fuel removal, and incentives to find economical solutions to the treatment of low-value timber stands.

Authors of the report recognized that the greatest threat to communities came in the form of forest stands adjacent to the communities that could not be treated (harvested) economically because they did not fit the profile of traditional saw-timber stands. These stands are typically very dense and contain a mix of merchantable and unmerchantable trees, with greater emphasis on the unmerchantable component. Adding to the cost of treating these stands are significant social and environmental constraints.

The province's response to the Filmon Report was the Strategic Wildfire Prevention Program Initiative (SWPPI), a community wildfire planning and fuel treatment funding program administered by the Union of B.C. Municipalities. In the six years since the SWPPI was established, the province has spent over \$50 million to treat 43,000 hectares of hazardous forest adjacent to B.C. communities. This is a mere two per cent of the 1.8 million hectares of hazardous forest identified by the province as in need of treatment. The simple reason that such a low percentage of the hazard has been treated is the cost of treatment; the cost of removing, or treating, on-site hazardous fuels ranges from a low of \$1,000/hectare to a high of \$20,000/hectare. This situation leaves many of B.C.'s communities still at high risk of damage from wildfire.

The only way to aggressively and quickly address the high cost of treatment is to add value to the unmerchantable material by seeking an alternative economic use for it. The only potential use of this material that would cover the cost of treatment is as feedstock for the production of bioenergy. Communities throughout the province are now looking at the



emerging bioenergy sector not only as a solution to the interface wildfire hazard issue, but also as a way to diversify the local economy, increase employment, and save local taxpayers money on heating costs as well as on carbon taxes.

Unfortunately, the barrier to making investment in community bioenergy viable is access to sufficient quantities of cheap feedstock.

The Crown land surrounding most of B.C.'s communities is usually under long-term tenure to one or more forest companies who have licensed rights to the fibre. Post-Filmon Report, the strategic approach to treatment assumed that communities and forest companies would be able to jointly plan the treatment of high-hazard interface stands, with those companies tasked with carrying out the treatments. When it became evident that all three parties were not co-operating, making the process unworkable, the province then changed the strategy and developed a number of small-scale license opportunities enabling communities to access the stands that the timber companies refused to treat, or more recently the refuse created through harvesting operations.

If the treatment involved only unmerchantable wood the community could have 75 per cent of the treatment cost covered by a grant from the UBCM; if the stand was a mix of unmerchantable and merchantable, the community would have to cover all costs associated with the treatment, including payment of stumpage and responsibility for wildfire hazard liability and for the cost of reforestation. In either case, the local government would be on the hook for thousands of dollars, and between the recession and the collapse of the United States housing market, this latter strategy has fared no better than the previous one.

So, what's the solution? The province's response to the Filmon Report was to place the interface wildfire problem at the feet of local government and the forest companies; they really have no role in mitigating this significant public land hazard outside of reviewing and approving grant applications. This approach is in stark contrast to that taken by agencies responsible for public lands in the United States. U.S. public agencies review hazard reduction planning with local government and then take the lead in treating the hazard and accepting all financial, legal, and silvicultural liabilities.

Forest companies appear willing to treat the more merchantable stands but not the unmerchantable ones, which pose the greatest fire hazard. Communities cannot afford to treat the unmerchantable stands unless they can subsidize the treatment with some merchantable material and have access to enough unmerchantable stands sufficient to encourage bioenergy investment. If the forest companies relinquish their rights to the fibre in interface areas, they will be subsequently penalized through a reduction in their Annual Allowable Cut (AAC). Likewise they would be penalized should they manage for lower stocking in the interface to reduce wildfire hazard.

B.C.'s policy for the treatment of the wildfire hazard in the wildland-urban interface inadvertently pits communities against forest companies. A solution can be gained through a cooperative arrangement between communities and forest companies affected by change in forest policy on the part of the province. The central tenets of the solution involve these policy decisions:

Interface lands need to be taken out of the timber harvesting land base and should not be contributing to the AAC; these lands need to be managed to meet a hazard reduction objective, not a timber supply objective.

Commercial harvest from Crown lands in the interface should not be levied stumpage, as all revenues need to go back into the site for post-harvest fuel treatment and long-term fuels maintenance.



Harvest standards, due to the proximity to the interface, need to be far more stringent than those currently acceptable to the province.

The interface zone needs to be wide enough to affect the behavior of a landscape fire and to make fuel management economical. This means that the local community must be free of any financial liability for the treatment of wildfire hazard on Crown land.

The community can carry out the actual management of the interface lands with the local forest company having first refusal on buying all commercial timber removed. In this way the forest company gets the timber volume within their chart area while the community gets the unmerchantable material for use in bioenergy. The community would be responsible for planning, public consultation, post-harvest fuels clean-up, and the maintenance of the stand and would maintain a trust account from the profit of fibre sales for long-term fibre management and hazard management.

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