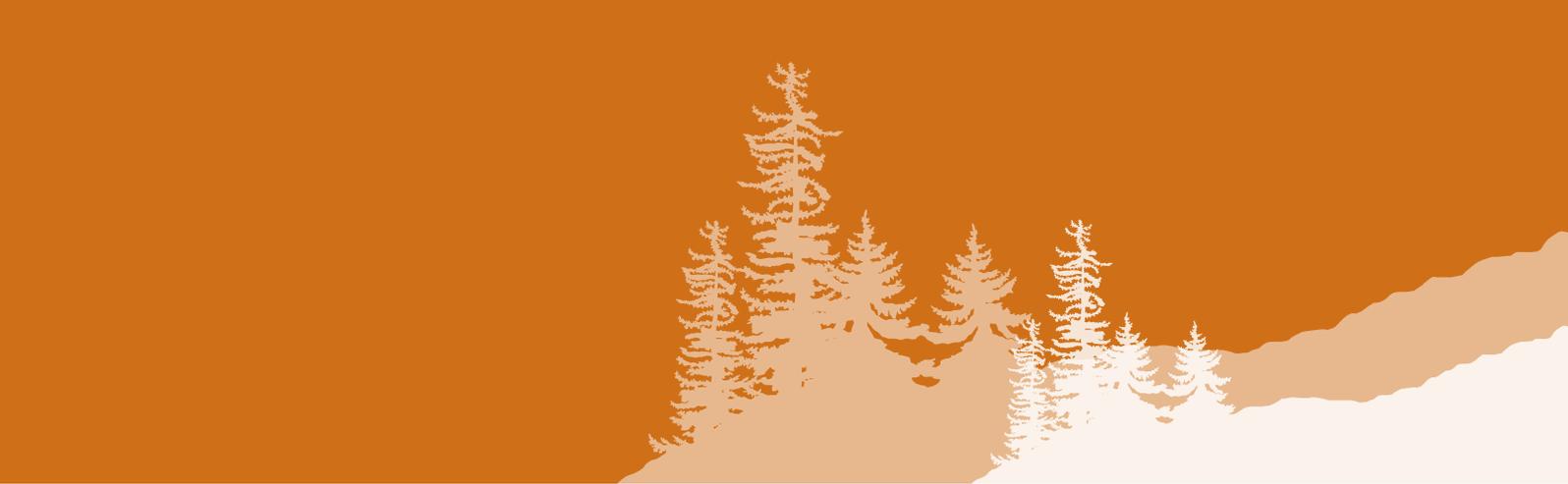


# 'What' is 'Not Satisfactorily Restocked' in BC's Forests?

*By Ben Parfitt*





In recent months, the dispute over just how well or how poorly British Columbia's forests are re-stocked has taken on a more public profile as senior BC Forest Service personnel past and present offer up widely different accounts.

At one end of the spectrum is a published account by BC's chief forester Jim Snetsinger, in which one of the senior most civil servants in the Forest Service claims that the current extent of "not satisfactorily-restocked" forestland is in the vicinity of 715,000 hectares of land. Snetsinger further claims that there is "potential" for this figure to increase by a further 775,000 hectares due to the mountain pine beetle outbreak, but that only a tiny portion of such lands would likely be replanted due to their remoteness, steep slopes and low productivity.

On the other end of the spectrum sits former Forest Service employee, Anthony Britneff, a recent retiree and professional forester who spent nearly 40 years in the government's employ.

Britneff claims the total extent of NSR is 9.1 million hectares, of which 2.3 million hectares would be reasonable to target for immediate reforestation efforts.

The gulf between the two positions is considerable, and it goes a long way to explaining why BC's independent forest watchdog, the Forest Practices Board, decided in September to launch a special investigation to clarify the status of such lands.

No matter what position the Board sides with, or whether it takes the road most traveled and lands somewhere in the middle, the bigger question is what will ultimately be done after it releases its findings.

That's because much more is at stake than just an independently arbitrated resolution to a dispute between professionals over numbers. At its core, the dispute strikes at the heart of what public officials acting on the public's behalf view as the scope of their responsibilities. If there is a reforestation challenge at hand, is that challenge most properly limited to dealing with only those lands that actively contribute to the so-called "timber harvesting land base", in other words that area of forestland earmarked for likely logging and replanting efforts? Or is the challenge at hand more broad, encompassing all Crown forestland that may be subject to disturbances ranging from historic logging, to overgrazing, to pest and disease outbreaks and wildfires?

Obviously the amount of forestland deemed not-satisfactorily restocked or NSR will be considerably less if the former rather than the latter is the case. This will translate into fewer seed cones needing to be collected, fewer seeds sown in nurseries and fewer seedlings planted.

If it is the latter, then a much different and quite likely far larger restoration effort will be required – one that carries significantly higher costs for the public service acting on the public's behalf, but one that may also deliver benefits that few of us pause to think about.

For example, in the spring of 2007 the lower Fraser Valley narrowly avoided what could have been a one-in-100-year flood, a flood that could have affected tens of thousands of homeowners and damaged some of the best farmland and largest farming operations in the province. A much-feared extended period of warm weather did not materialize and the flood was averted. But had it occurred, a contributing factor to the downstream devastation would have

been a preponderance of dead pine trees whose roots no longer absorbed water and whose needles were no longer there to shade the ground.

It would have mattered not one iota to Fraser Valley residents whether the trees in question were on the timber harvesting land base or not.

One other important issue that the Board may wish to consider in "clarifying the status" of NSR lands, is the important question of what the status is of logged forests that have been replanted and deemed to have reached a healthy "free-growing" state. This is an issue that applies much more to the timber harvesting land base at present, but is one that all who care about the economic and environmental benefits of forests ought to care about.

When a logged forest is replanted a milestone is eventually reached where the planted trees are determined to be sufficient in number, density and height to have become free-growing. At this point it is assumed by the Forest Service that such sites will simply chug along to provide merchantable volumes of timber to the forest industry in future years.

But as the Forest Practices Board is aware, new work led by the Forest Service's Alex Woods has unearthed disturbing evidence of declines in the number of living, healthy trees on numerous "free-growing" sites years after the milestone was reached.

Such work suggests that the time has come for a much broader view of what constitutes healthy and sufficiently restocked forests, further underscoring the timeliness of the Board's decision to address this important public policy issue. †

Ben Parfitt is a Victoria resident and writes frequently on forestry and natural resource management issues.