

Assessing British Columbia Timber Policy

Those interested in forests usually take one of two positions. Preservationists believe that forests have intrinsic values as diverse ecosystems as well as instrumental environmental values such as stabilizing climates and serving as watersheds. Use of public forests should be limited to human activities that do not disrupt these critical ecological functions. But the predominant view has been that trees are crops and public forests are to be harvested as a product. There is no consensus over exactly how public forests can produce maximum yield. One approach seeks to manage trees of about the same age and size in a kind of industrial forestry approach where forests are tree farms. The biodiversity of old-growth forests is replaced with a monoculture of fast-growing trees that can be economically harvested. These forests are often logged through clear-cutting, where all trees in an area are cut at the same time and then the area is reseeded for the next generation of growth. Alternatively, forests could be harvested through the tree-seed approach, where some trees are left to provide seed for the next growth. Clear cutting is a simple, easily managed, economically efficient logging approach, that requires a minimum of management and planning. It facilitates the growth of desirable trees by ensuring they have access to sunlight. It also results in destroyed habitat and reduced biodiversity, soil erosion, water pollution, flooding, and reduced recreational uses of forests. A second approach maintains trees at different ages and sizes. Selective timber cuts are aimed at mature trees with high economic value are cut, but logging is carried out in a way that encourages the growth of smaller trees, promotes biological diversity, and accommodates multiple uses of forests. Vegetation is naturally regenerated and less erosion and damage to watersheds occur than in clearcutting. Some foresters believe selective cuts are less profitable than clear cuts. Strip cutting is a middle strategy, involving clear cuts along sections of the forest but leaving surrounding areas intact; in this way, an entire forest could be eventually clear-cut, but over a long-enough period of time that forest health is significantly preserved.⁴⁴

The Government's Critics

Logging interests have been critical of the Forest Practices Code as a burdensome, bureaucratic infringement on their business. The code and accompanying regulations and guidelines form a pile of paper more than three feet high. They acknowledge some benefits such as protection of water, wildlife, and biodiversity; some stability to exports; and consistency in logging practices across the province. But the costs of the code, industry officials, charge, are too high. Workers are afraid of losing their jobs. Companies are afraid of fines from inadvertent violations of the detailed provisions that could cost them \$1 million, although during the first year, violations resulted in stop-work orders or remediation orders, or penalties of less than \$10,000. Typical violations include damaging Crown timber, practices that don't conform to specifications, causing environmental damage, or building trails that were not provided for in plans. Industry officials argue that the environmental benefits of compliance with the codes are not just offset by increased costs, but also by increased risks to loggers. Narrower roads that leave less of a footprint result in fewer landslides, less soil compaction, and more wildlife habitat, as well as less of a safety zone for loggers who may need to flee rolling logs.⁴⁵