

GROWING OUR WORKFORCE

By Sandra Bishop

The BC Forest Sector Workforce Initiative recently launched three Labour Market Partnerships (LMPs) in conjunction with the Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training. The LMPs are part of a broader strategy or *Roadmap Forward* to address the forest industry's current and future workforce challenges.

"The main driver for action is the sector's ageing workforce," notes Mike Cass, Vice President of Timberlands, Western Forest Products and Chair of the Workforce Initiative. "In the absence of a targeted and sustained effort to rebuild our industry's workforce, the forest industry is going to hit a crisis point."

Over the past few years the forest industry has focused its attention on its

workforce needs, quantifying the skill shortages and identifying the challenges and strategies needed to address them. Its findings include the need for more than 2,700 new hires each year and the cost of attracting, recruiting and training new hires is estimated at \$220 million per year or about \$3.10 per cubic metre harvested.

There are other findings of note in this comprehensive look at the current and forecasted needs of the BC forest industry through 2022. For example, over the next decade the sector's aging workforce will lead to shortages in the professional, production management and skilled trade occupations, as well as a wide range of production workers who

harvest and transport products from the forest to the market. This is because the anticipated turnover rates over the next 10 years are 60 per cent for forestry and logging, and 40 per cent for the solid wood and pulp and paper sectors.

"The TLA was the lead organization that shepherded the early work in 2013 on behalf of industry, producing the report that substantiated the need to rejuvenate the labour force," recalls Cass. "And the TLA was instrumental in encouraging industry to come together and approach our challenges from a provincial perspective. This is a legacy that should be acknowledged."

The TLA has built its reputation on leadership, recently convening with the



Honourable Steve Thomson, Minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations and a group of coastal mayors at UBCM to discuss findings from its most recent report, which surveyed 27 community leaders to produce *Communities Perspectives on the BC Coastal Forest Industry*. This study reported on the outcome of two surveys conducted by the TLA, one in 2004 and the other in 2015, benchmarking changes in attitude and expectation.

Not surprisingly, mayors are concerned about job loss and the economic impact on coastal towns and cities. It was evident from the survey that community leaders understand the value of the forest industry to their local com-

munities and to the provincial economy—an industry that today contributes approximately one job in every 16. They also recognize the need to improve the image of the forest industry in order to attract young people to it.

“Most young people believe there are no careers in forestry, but those who have joined the industry are astonished at what a good life they can create for their families and themselves. That story needs to get out!” said Mayor Bill McKay of Nanaimo.

The average skilled employee salary in the industry is about \$75,000 annually. However, Project Manager Kelly McCloskey notes, there are key recruitment challenges “including a lack of quali-

fied workers, significant education and training gaps, a lack of job and career information and inadequate financial support for on-the-job training.”

Community leaders acknowledge the forest industry provides well-paying local jobs, but say it suffers from “short-term contracts limiting long-term stability” and needs to introduce “stable shifts so young people can raise families.” Clearly, the mayors believe there is much more to be done with support for training, education and hiring locally.

They say everyone has a part to play in educating current and future generations about the benefits the forest industry has to offer. On top of offering “safe, dependable, high income jobs to

support families,” the forest industry is “high tech, green and sustainable” and we should be working hard on “defining it as a renewable resource.”

The TLA continues to support the development of a provincial recruitment and training strategy to ensure there are enough skilled workers to meet the growing industry demand, but agrees there are challenges to overcome. There are 4,700 job openings projected in coastal forestry and timber harvesting operations between now and 2022, 95 per cent due to pending retirements.

“The biggest challenge we’ve had,” admits McCloskey, “relates to the size and complexity of the industry, the difficulty in determining what the ‘collective interest’ is, and moving forward on tangible solutions that address short-term needs. From an historical perspective, renewing and upgrading the labour force is not an area the sector has a lot of experience approaching collectively. The strategies that the Labour Market Partnerships will start to address are the first important steps.”

He notes that other industries like mining or oil and gas are more unified and better able to access government funding and resources for recruitment and training. “We’re competing with these industries for employees and we have a long way to go to catch up to them.”

As the BC Forest Sector Workforce Initiative reports, “Overall, many young people view the industry as low tech, environmentally unfriendly, seasonal and uncertain, and geographically remote.” In contrast, the interest for “First Nations youth is increasing and more positive given the jobs are often local, however additional support may be required to upgrade, ladder and advance these candidates to the skilled jobs available.”

The three Labour Market Partnerships announced by the Ministry will help address these challenges and barriers with management provided by the Council of Forest Industries, the BC Forest Safety Council and the First Nations Forestry Council. McCloskey points out the objective of this industry-led initiative is to leverage existing industry resources and provide value by implementing the priorities industry has identified.

“We need to be able to communicate the opportunities forestry offers in a way

that attracts people to the industry,” says McCloskey. To this end, COFI will manage a six-month project assessing the forest sector’s current career information and recruitment materials and programs, identifying gaps and additional products required as well as the means to create, deliver, evaluate and sustain them. COFI will also develop a sector plan for recruitment materials with goals and tactics which will form the basis of a follow-up proposal in early 2017.

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Expanding on the work the BC Forest Safety Council has completed on faller training, over the next 18-months the organization will focus on establishing occupational skill and competency guidelines for 35 forestry and logging occupations, as well as the tools necessary to assess an individual’s ability to meet them. “It’s really defining what the skills are for each of these forestry and logging occupations to safely perform each job so trainers and instructors know what’s required and there’s uniformity in delivery,” explains McCloskey. The project will form the basis of a follow-up proposal to address other priority occupations and ensure alignment with education and training providers.

And lastly, a six-month project led by the First Nations Forestry Council will look at increasing First Nations participation in the industry by establishing the methodology to assess First Nation’s interest in and means to participate in a forestry career development effort. The organization will develop a list of interested First Nations and bands as well as related activities of local industry and government. Upon completion, this information will form the basis of a follow-up proposal to undertake the studies and in the longer term, help support and steer First Nation candidates into a forestry career path. “What a great way to invest in our future,” McCloskey adds, “by getting First Nations into the local workforce with careers that offer good salaries.”

The TLA believes strong, positive and lasting relationships with First Nations

will not only support local communities, but will also help attract First Nations youth to the industry. It agrees with the Workforce Initiative that states, “The importance of boosting First Nations skills, capacity and engagement in the forest economy is instrumental to the success of the sector as a whole.” Importantly, the TLA sees this solution can advance career opportunities for First Nations, helping to address underemployment while also tackling the

shortage of skilled workers facing BC’s forest industry.

The TLA is committed to playing a greater role in raising awareness about the importance of the forest industry and the benefits it has to offer young people. “We have been listening to the voices of our community leaders and are acting on their responses to our survey,” emphasizes TLA Executive Director David Elstone. “It’s important for us to partner in this Initiative and support a broader industry approach to education and training that grows our future workforce.”

Along with these efforts, the TLA continues to support education programs that community leaders take pride in, such as the secondary school forestry programs in Port Alberni, Port Hardy and Campbell River and the forestry education programs in the BC Forestry Discovery Centre. And the TLA’s Forestry Education Fund continues to provide scholarships to students in the trades and universities, which has over the years contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the education and training of our future forestry workers.

The TLA stands with coastal community leaders, believing everyone has a role to play in attracting young people into the industry. “It’s a must!” concludes Mayor Mike Ruttan of Port Alberni.▲