

AFTER THE FIRE: SALVAGING FORESTRY IN BC'S INTERIOR

By Robin Brunet



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To say that August was a nail-biting month for Interior Logging Association President Reid Hedlund would be an understatement. He, along with his neighbours and colleagues, watched forest fires obliterate over 30 homes in the Rock Creek area north to Westbridge and tear through hectares of harvestable stands.

At one point the gigantic Stickpin blaze of Washington State, which grew to 21,965 hectares and threatened to cross the US border into Canada, seemed certain to destroy his properties. Meanwhile, “it was uphill and upwind, so the situation was very tense” because the Testalinden Creek fire near Osoyoos, which grew to 5,202 hectares, caused Hedlund and his family to be put on evacuation notice for a week and threatened his ranch.

But Hedlund downplays the drama. “I was lucky I didn’t lose anything, whereas many, many people did,” he says. As for the magnitude of the fires, he is hard-pressed to put them into context. “I was born and raised in the Interior, and I’ve never experienced a summer like it for sheer size and intensity. And there wasn’t the sense of relief you usually get at the end of summer—no drastic rainfall that shut everything down.”

Hedlund, who is also a logging contractor, is equally stumped when asked to speculate on what the fires’ impact

on the forest industry will be. “No one knows the entire picture yet,” he told Truck Logger in late October, adding that operations in the Midway region “were still being shut down at 1 pm daily because it was so dry.”

Hedlund is hardly alone in his uncertainty. In late October, the district managers of Osoyoos and Christina Lake were busy finalizing their assessments—which, according to an unnamed source, included the possible salvage of 334 hectares out of about 472 ravaged hectares of timber harvesting land base in Osoyoos. (The same source said about 3,000 cubic metres of decked wood, from constructing right-of-ways for heavy equipment and clearing for fireguards, had been earmarked for possible salvage by First Nations and other parties.)

through 25,107 hectares of the coastal region and 14,600 hectares in the south-east, while the Kamloops and Cariboo areas lost 11,400 and 9,769 hectares to fire respectively.

For all these numbers, perhaps the most remarkable thing about the incendiary summer of 2015 is that it didn’t do more damage to logging operations. “As a licensee with tenures in the vicinity of Rock Creek and Christina Lake, the fires had a relatively low impact for Interfor as far as we can tell, although they could have easily caused a lot more problems,” says Geoff Bekker, Interfor’s Woods Manager for the Kootenay division. Interfor’s two mills in Castlegar and Grand Forks rely on wood coming from the company’s allowable annual cut of 1.1 million cubic metres.

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But if salvage opportunities are unclear, the scope of the damage is not. According to the BC Wildfire Service, as of October 29 a total of 1,843 fires in 2015 had burned 304,460 hectares of land, with the majority of the devastation (213,174 hectares) occurring in the Prince George region. Fires tore

blaze “happened in the river valley bottoms and was devastating to homeowners as well as woodlot licensees and community forests; the area now looks like a moonscape.”

Interfor Logging Supervisor Aaron Gunther, who happened to be near the Kettle Valley Provincial Park when the

fire erupted on August 13, wound up evacuating visitors from the area. Later that evening, Bekker worked with Southeast Fire Centre officials to send six forest professionals to help guide equipment operators and heavy machinery to establish a fire line. (Meanwhile, Hedlund's crew plus a D6, a D8, low bed trucks, a skidder and a water tank were part of a Canadian contingent that journeyed daily into Washington State to build fire guards against the Stickpin blaze).

Bekker calls the advance of the Rock Creek fire "a nail biter for Interfor, especially on the first day when south winds pushed it quickly along. But after that there wasn't much growth, thanks to lots of air support and water drops, even though the fire wasn't officially declared under control for a few weeks."

Bekker's main concern, as his crews survey the damage, is satisfying Interfor's wood chip client, Celgar. "In determining what's salvageable, we can't send any wood through the mill that contains carbon," he says. "Plus, carbon dust messes up optic scanners and is unacceptable in this post-Lakeland era of mill safety."

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But Bekker overall is optimistic about salvage opportunities. "If only the bottom of stems in a stand are burned or if the bark is burned, then the wood can be used. It's only when fire penetrates into the fibre via a rotted knot that a tree is no good—and rarely is a tree burned throughout."

For the heavily burned stands Interfor has already rejected, Bekker says, "they'll be suitable for someone making timber or rail ties. Hopefully there will be some avenue available for interested parties to use the wood. Chips are a big part of our business and quality cannot be compromised."

Hedlund's company, Mid-Boundary Contracting, employs 25 people and operates in the Midway and Grand Forks regions, with most of the logging done on behalf of Interfor and its Grand Forks sawmill. While Hedlund agrees that a lot of burned wood is salvageable, he notes that "unfortunately, mills are faced with a glut of fibre, and the burn



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Another challenge in salvaging burned timber is warding off criticism that the trees should stay put to provide nutrients for soil.

stuff showing up won't be as desirable as green logs."

However, as co-owner of the former Pope & Talbot mill in Midway that resumed independent operation in 2011 and is usually obliged to purchase wood from the open market, Hedlund says that burnt wood "creates fibre that otherwise wouldn't be available. It'll keep

Rim Fire that charred a quarter-million acres of the Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park in 2013; an estimated one billion board feet of salvageable dead trees were left that could have been a windfall for economically depressed towns in the region.

But it was determined that it would take four to eight years to process all the logs that could be salvaged from the fire, and it took foresters a full year alone to survey the burned stands and offer contracts. That left a year in which the stands could be harvested before the wood was no longer commercially viable.

Moreover, there wasn't enough local mill capacity to process that many trees. Trucking the logs out of the region was the most obvious solution, but the costs involved dramatically reduced the desirability of the salvage contracts

about 60 mill workers and a few logging contractors busy."

BC is no stranger to making the most out of damaged wood. But several examples in the US illustrate the challenges inherent in salvaging burned timber. One of the biggest being the

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that were offered (the added costs of importing trucks and labor to harvest the burned wood also reduced the desirability of the contracts).

Salvage costs in the wake of even much smaller fires can be off-putting. When contracts were offered for 250 acres in California's Calaveras County that had been decimated by the 2012 Ramsey Fire, not a single bid was made by any of the region's lumber companies.

(In this case, the cost of skyline yarding that would be required was cited as the deciding factor).

The other challenge in salvaging burned timber is warding off criticism from environmental groups, many of whom argue that the trees should stay put because they provide nutrients for soil and habitat for wildlife. Earlier this year in Washington State, two green groups filed court appeals to prevent

logging on about 1,200 acres of forests burned in the Carlton fire of 2014. Their argument was it would cause erosion and mudslides, despite the Commissioner of Public Lands having used the best scientific information available in designing the harvest.

Costs and criticism aside, the 2015 BC blazes may also provide an opportunity to advance salvage practices—if history is anything to go by. In 2002, the Forest Engineering Research Institute of Canada (FERIC) and other parties published a study about the effect of fire on trees intended for wood chips and pulp; damaged stands in Slave Lake had been used for the research.

FERIC found that chip recovery from burned aspen logs increased the longer the trees were allowed to age, due to the deterioration of the bond between the bark and the stem (which allowed debarking equipment to remove the bark without damaging wood fibre, thereby increasing fibre recovery).

But these and other possible opportunities that await in BC's charred forests are still in the future. In the meantime, for the locals who watched the fires advance to their doorsteps, the first order of business is making the summer of 2015 a distant memory. "It'll be quite a while before everyone recovers, but green grass is already growing in the burned stands and it's useful to keep in mind that while it doesn't take much to kindle fires, it doesn't take much to quash them either," says Hedlund. "Let's hope the rains will be heavier next year when we need them."▲

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