

Woodlots



In Canada, members of the public can manage their own small part of the public forest estate

Listen to a woodlot operator in British Columbia and the enthusiasm and sense of commitment to the land tend to increase exponentially as the conversation continues.

The 860 and counting woodlot licence owners in Canada's western-most province clearly take to heart their stewards of the land role.

Lisa Marak is a good example and eloquent spokesman for the woodlot licence concept. Since 1985, her family have operated their woodlot adjacent to the city boundaries of Kelowna in the southern interior of BC.

"We share the challenges and manage our woodlots through the whole cycle of forest management from harvesting to site preparation, planting and tending the young stands," she summarises. "We get to know the land intimately and we're passionate about what we do."

It's true everything is on a micro-scale compared to the industrial sized operations run by large corporations. By law, the woodlot tenure can occupy 600 hectares maximum in the BC interior, and less in coastal areas. But since their introduction in 1979, woodlots have allowed individuals, groups and first nations their little share of Crown-owned land to manage.

The woodlot licence is renewable every 20 years but there are checks and balances. Development plans for woodlot licence areas need to be submitted to and approved by the provincial government and made available for scrutiny and public feedback from affected or interested third parties.

Lisa Marak's woodlot is on the

east side of Kelowna in hilly, dry country with creek drainage. Interior Douglas fir is the predominant species with some spruce and pine. "It's lovely," she says.

The woodlot is shared with prolific populations of white tailed deer and much smaller numbers of mule deer. "We are required to retain some big tree shelter habitat for the mule deer," she points out. Deer browsing on tree seedlings is a frustrating management issue here, as it is in parts of the UK. But Lisa Marak has other forest health issues to worry about and tackle.

The mountain pine beetle epidemic in the BC interior is Canada's worst recorded forest health disaster. Billions of Lodgepole pine have been killed: estimated numbers continue climbing. The mid-term commercial timber supply in the province's central and northern interiors is predicted by the government to drop area by up to 45 per cent as a result of the beetle epidemic. The scale is unprecedented and it has also taken its toll on the pine component of Lisa Marak's woodlot.

The spruce budworm has also been a periodic issue Lisa Marak's had to address, along with tussock moth damage and root rot in fir. It's a natural battlefield out there on the woodlot. And just for good measure, a savage wind storm about five years ago downed some of the woodlot's big fir and necessitated a major clean up effort, she recalls.

Lisa Marak employs both selective logging and clear-cut techniques to address forest health issues and to prepare timber for sale. "When we clear cut it's typically in small



Lisa Marak walking in her 600-hectare woodlot.

blocks, one to two hectares in size," she says, and the harvesting method selected varies with the task in hand. She's hired contractors with equipment such as harvesters and forwarders specifically suited to the site and the job in hand, as well as hand fallers and skidders.

"Our local rural loggers and truckers go out of their way to reduce damage to the ground and take pride in their work," she reports.

Lisa Marak says there have been changes in the structure of the regional forest industry in the last few years that have reduced the options for marketing fibre from her woodlot. Sawmill ownership has become more consolidated into fewer and larger companies. They have the clout to dictate the going

price for wood types in the regional market. However, she says, options do remain: like the family-owned sawmill that manufactures speciality white wood products from Lisa Marak's spruce, along with other small sawmill owners and one-man operations that are grateful to get access to the timber they require.

Lisa Marak does work with the Federation of BC Woodlot Associations in addition to operating her own, helping run a ranch and a family. She's learned something about the 'average' woodlot owner.

"The majority use their woodlot to supplement their income. Some are consultants or foresters, ranchers or farmers," she notes. Still others are maybe some of the above and also small-scale sawmillers, using a woodlot to custom-cut for local and regional end users.

"The woodlot owners tend to be rural-based, self employed people," she continues. "They're independent thinkers. They know they can't dial a 1-800 number every time they have a problem."

Maintaining a successful woodlot in British Columbia represents a lot of work," she vouches.

But one suspects most woodlot licencees would agree with Lisa Marak when she declares: "It's a labour of love."

Jim Stirling



Logging in progress on the woodlot.