

December 4, 2017

B.C.'s reforestation practices took root in Campbell River – Forestry Task Force shares history

Modern day reforestation in British Columbia took root in Campbell River's Beaver Lodge Forest Lands.

The City's Forestry Task Force offers this article to demonstrate how the current practice of planting trees to restock a harvested forest site started when planting began in Beaver Lodge Forest Lands in 1931.

"The forest industry here in BC has been active in a significant way for over 125 years, starting in the 1880s," says task force member Steve Lackey. "All reforestation in those early years relied upon natural regeneration. Often times, so-called seed trees were left standing in a harvested area and wind would spread seed from their matured cones to restock the surrounding forest lands."

Leaving reforestation up to seed trees was common in areas where Douglas fir and western red cedar had been the main species growing in a harvested stand – and often resulted in spotty regeneration with hardwood species like big leaf maple and red alder in amongst the new seedlings.

"But because B.C.'s forests seemed endless in those days, reforestation was not a big priority for those harvesting the bounty," Lackey says.

People took a closer look at reforestation in the 1920s when large areas of harvested but not restocked lands started to accumulate on the coast. The Forest Branch of the day began significant research on improving natural regeneration techniques with experimental plantation as early as 1925. In 1927, the first planting trials took place in the first small BC Forest Branch nursery on Shelbourne Street in Victoria where the first seedlings were grown and planted. In 1929, Green Timbers Forestry Station in Surrey, was developed as the province's first production forest nursery.

In 1931, a harvested 450-hectare property (approximately 1,100 acres) now known as Beaver Lodge Forest Lands was left in trust to the Crown (and our community) by the Elk River Timber Company for "experimental work in reforestation." That same year, approximately seven hectares (17 acres) of what was called the Campbell River Experimental Forest were planted with 8,000 seedlings. The tree species planted included Douglas fir, Sitka spruce and yellow (Ponderosa) pine and, although not listed on the official report, western larch and black cottonwood. This became the first operational plantation in B.C. outside of the Victoria and Surrey forest nursery sites.

Over the first three years of this experimental forest, 75 hectares (185 acres) were planted with seedlings from the Green Timbers nursery.

"Eventually, the entire trust area was reforested through a combination of planted and naturally-regenerated trees. Even today, you can still find pine, larch and Sitka spruce – along with the many Douglas firs that were planted in the Beaver Lodge Forest Lands in those early years," adds task force chairperson Councillor Charlie Cornfield. "Thanks to the ever-present donation from Mother Nature, there are also many naturally-regenerated grand fir, red cedar, hemlock and hardwood species."

B.C.'s first official production plantation was established in 1932 on West Thurlow Island at Knox Bay (on the Johnstone Strait side between Campbell River and Kelsey Bay). A total of 221 hectares (545 acres) were planted with more than 235,000 two-year-old, bare-root trees. The Douglas fir (178,650), Sitka spruce (37,300) and yellow (Ponderosa) pine (21,350) all came from the Green Timbers nursery in crates aboard the Union Steam Ship Chelohsin.

Over the next six years, another 1,300 hectares were planted with nursery seedlings, in small projects in the Sayward Valley, Knox Bay and Lake Cowichan.

Reforestation in B.C. changed dramatically after the Great Fire of 1938. The largest forest fire in the history of industrial logging on Vancouver Island started near Mohun Lake that July and was pushed by unrelenting northwest winds for more than a month, destroying more than 30,000 hectares (about 75,000 acres) of the Sayward forest and huge swaths of private forest lands owned by Elk River Timber Company, Bloedel, Stewart and Welch Company and Comox Logging and Railway Co.

"It was the real turning point in the B.C. reforestation program when the companies and the provincial forest branch initiated the largest reforestation effort in the history of the province to that day," Lackey says. "It was also the impetus for the rapid development of the new Campbell River Forest Nursery."

Exact totals of numbers of trees planted to reforest the burned out area were not kept, but in 1939 and 1940 alone nearly two million seedlings were planted on Crown lands in the Sayward Forest. The companies with private lands affected by the fire also began reforestation of their lands in those years.

"Labour was hard to come by during the war years, and many men planting for the government and the companies identified as conscientious objectors or so-called Alternate Service Workers. Another labour source was the Young Men's Forestry Training Program, established during the 1930s depression years," Lackey says.

The post-fire reforestation was finally completed around 1954 with many millions of trees planted.

"The legacy of those early days of planting in the Campbell River area has borne fruit that continues to benefit our community and region today," Lackey says.

Many of those early plantations at Knox Bay and the Great Fire sites have been harvested and replanted again. The Campbell River Nursery, now owned and operated by Pacific Regeneration Technologies Ltd., continues to provide up to 15 million seedlings each year for reforestation programs. In 1980, Sylvan Vale Nursery started in the Black Creek area and now produces more than seven million seedlings per year.

"What started out as an experimental program with the planting of 8,000 seedlings in Beaver Lodge Forest Lands in 1931 has become a program where an average of 218 million trees are planted throughout the province each year," Lackey says.

In 1981, the province planted its one billionth tree. On May 29, 1997 the four billionth tree, a Douglas fir, was planted by Premier Glen Clark and the other western Canada premiers on the grounds of the Campbell River Museum. Today, the number of trees planted has more than doubled again.

"The reforestation history in B.C. has come a long way from its infancy in the 1920s. It has evolved into what today is recognized as a world-class program of quality seedling and reforestation standards," Lackey says.

In British Columbia, it is law for all harvested areas on Crown lands and on private Managed Forest lands to be reforested to certain standards within specific time limits. Crown land requirements are set out in the provincial *Silviculture Practices Regulation*. The *Private Managed Forest Land Council Regulation* regulates forestry activity on privately-held Managed Forest land.

About 80 per cent of harvested areas in B.C. are reforested by planting, with the balance reforested through natural regeneration. All harvested sites must be satisfactorily stocked with ecologically-suitable tree species in acceptable numbers that can grow without competition from brush or hardwood species. More than 20 different species are planted in B.C., and pre-harvest site evaluations based on soil type, climate and geographic and ecological site conditions determine which species are planted where.

"For more than 40 years on the coast, it's been common to plant several different seedling species in the same previously-harvested area, each planted on a specific site where the ecology suits its growing requirements," Lackey says.

"The City of Campbell River's Forestry Task Force encourages you to get outdoors for a walk in the beautiful Beaver Lodge Forest Lands and take a moment to admire the living history that's been growing there since 1931," adds Councillor Cornfield.

The nine members of Campbell River's Forestry Task Force bring diverse backgrounds to their forest industry expertise and represent First Nations, entrepreneurs, education and employment services, woodlot owners, and professional foresters. The task force also includes three, non-voting city representatives: Councillor Cornfield and City staff members from the economic development and property departments.

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Comox Logging and Railway Company crew planting areas burned by the Great Fire Circa ~1939.
Image 1-68763 Courtesy BC Archives Collection



BC Forest Branch tree planting crew ready for work planting in the Sayward Forest after the 1938 fire.
Image 12271 Courtesy of the Museum at Campbell River