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Old Growth Strategic Review Panel

**What old growth means to the Resort Municipality of Whistler and how we value it.**

The Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) is a thriving resort community with stable year-round visitation and business activity. Tourism is the primary driver of Whistler's economic success where local businesses flourish and generate sustainable livelihoods for our residents, and economic returns for investors and the province. The surrounding natural environment is one of the resort community's greatest assets and is the core of the tourism sector that attracts over 3.5 million visitors annually.

Our economic engine is the environment and the resort community's success is based on its ability to promote vibrant guest experiences primarily through recreational adventures in the forests.

Experiencing the old growth forest is a draw for millions of visitors from around the world. The economic value of this experience can be expressed as follows: Whistler contributes \$1.3 billion per year to the provincial GDP which is equal to the combined contributions of the Agriculture and Fisheries sectors. It contributes approximately \$428 million in tax revenue per year (or \$1.17 million per day) to local, federal and provincial governments, and is responsible for an estimated 22.5 per cent of the entire annual tourism export revenue of British Columbia. Whistler generates over 15,000 direct jobs annually. The one time economic value and job creation of harvesting old growth trees within the RMOW cannot be compared to the long term sustainable tourism and environmental benefits.

The RMOW is a partner in the 33,000 hectare Cheakamus Community Forest (CCF), a three way equal partnership with the Lil'wat Nation and Squamish Nation ([www.cheakamuscommunityforest.com](http://www.cheakamuscommunityforest.com)) The RMOW sought to create a community forest adjacent to our community in order to have more control over forest harvesting decisions in relation to environmental and tourism goals. The opportunity to partner with the Lil'wat Nation and Squamish Nation is a positive outcome and has strengthened relationships between our communities as we co-manage the land base to meet our respective land management goals.

The RMOW understands the ecosystem values of old growth forests which is supported through the CCF's ecosystem-based management approach, municipal land use management policies and the Official Community Plan. It also places great value on old growth for the economic value it provides to our significant tourism economy. As many people in our community say, "the old growth trees are worth more standing up, than being cut down." Protecting Whistler's natural spaces is not only something residents and visitors are passionate about on a personal level, but it is critical to Whistler's tourism industry and ensuring the destination continues to enjoy a vibrant visitor-based economy for many years to come.

**The RMOW's perspective on how old growth is managed now.**

Key drivers in forest land management have changed since the Forest and Range Practices Act was introduced which necessitates a rethinking of policy goals and objectives to better serve BC now and into the future. Emerging drivers such as wildfire fuel management, climate change, First Nations reconciliation, and a better understanding of the interconnectedness of ecosystem communities generates the need to



reorient forest management to not only protect forests but improve overall community well-being, resilience to climate change, the economy, public health and First Nations relations in BC.

The RMOW's participation in the CCF is crucial to delivering our community values onto the timber harvesting land base and the partners are supportive, but the provincial policy framework limits our ability to fully deliver them due to tenure obligations that are not fully aligned. It forces a reliance on harvesting old growth well into the future due to the lack of merchantable second growth which is contrary to supporting our local economy, community values and ultimately the provincial economy.

The provincial Old Growth Management Area policy is a requirement when preparing a Forest Stewardship Plan and is a key tool in protecting priority areas, but for our community, it fell short of protecting the old growth forests that serve our tourism economy. To overcome the gap and protect old growth areas that are key to commercial recreation tourism operators as well as the broader public, the CCF identified additional hectares of old growth that would be voluntarily set aside from harvesting. It would make more sense to provide the latitude in provincial policy to deliver community values in harvesting choices.

#### **How the RMOW thinks old growth could be managed more effectively in the future.**

BC needs to significantly shift forest management toward community forests that more fully reflect community values and provide multi-dimensional benefits such as local job creation and retention, recreation and tourism development opportunities and strengthening regional and First Nations' partnerships. It would also be advantageous for community forests to be able to set old forest reserve levels that differ from provincial requirements in alignment with their individual management approach.

Given the increasing severity of BC's wildfire seasons, there is also an opportunity to shift away from harvesting old growth by focusing more on managing second growth forests to reduce the risk of wildfire. Old growth forests can be more naturally resilient to wildfire and can play a role in reducing risk and severity of fires. Additionally, the work provides job creation opportunities for our First Nations' partners.

The current centralized approach to managing BC's forests and in particular, old growth, is not nimble or flexible enough to allow communities to manage timber and forests in a way that best serves them in the short or long term. Shifting more decision-making to local communities within an overall set of provincial guidelines will provide the ability to serve multiple values within community and provincial priorities.