

Joel Mortyn

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Dear Messrs. Merkel and Gawley,

I write to you regarding the Old Growth Strategic Review. I am passionate about forests, having worked in forestry for my entire adult life. It runs in my blood. My grandfather started a sawmill in north-western Tasmania in the 1920s before working his way up to becoming the chief executive of one of the largest lumber companies in Australia. His love of forests passed on to me and he inspired me to seek a career in forestry, which eventually saw me move half-way around the world.

I have seen first-hand that the environmental lobby will not stop until logging is ended in native forests. In the state of Victoria, Australia where I was born, the government recently announced the phasing out of all native forests logging. This closure of a once thriving industry was cheered by environmental groups, but it barely made a ripple in the wider community. When the end came, the industry had been eroded to the point where the number of job losses was relatively minor, affecting far flung rural communities where most of the population had never ventured.

It came after many years where environmental groups had successfully chipped away at the timber harvesting land base. Each election cycle would offer the promise of another National Park, stricter logging regulations, more protected areas for wildlife. One by one, sawmills were shuttered as their timber supply became too small, fragmented or distant to turn a profit. The environmental lobby used these closures as proof that the forests were being unsustainably managed, and by and large the media and public lapped it up. That made it easier to win public support to repeatedly protect more forests, until finally the decision to end logging altogether didn't seem like that big of a deal.

But it is a big deal. Wood is one of the few renewable building materials that we have. It offers a real solution to climate change. The main alternatives to wood: steel and concrete, generate 12% of the world's carbon emissions, equivalent to the entire automotive sector. Wood is a carbon sink. The carbon sequestered by trees lives on in wood long after that tree is harvested, and all the while the next rotation of trees grows, sequestering even more carbon. We do better for the climate by using wood instead of steel and concrete. We also do better for our communities by supporting local jobs. A recent University of Washington study concluded that the building a mid-rise commercial building out of wood rather than concrete represented a 26.5% reduction in global warming potential.

Of course, this is not to say we should log all forests. We need a system of reserves and parks to protect the multitude of benefits that forests provide. And this is what we have in BC. We have a world-renowned parks system which people travel from far and wide to enjoy. Most of the public would not be aware that we also have numerous areas set aside within the working forest: from wildlife habitat areas, old-growth management areas, ungulate winter ranges, riparian areas, visual impact areas, protected watersheds, recreational areas and more. And for every tree we harvest in BC, many more are planted and nurtured back into healthy growing forests.

But like our parks system, the land base for harvesting timber also needs to be protected. Protected from environmental groups who seek to chip away at, bit by bit, until eventually there is not enough left to economically harvest.

Sadly, I see that vicious cycle repeating here in British Columbia. On the coast, the annual allowable cut has been gradually reduced by 30% since 1990. Today, 70% of the coastal forests are not available for harvesting, but still this is not enough. Now the environmental lobby are targeting old growth, which would further reduce the timber harvesting land base by roughly 40%. In the Great Bear Rainforest, where 85% of the forests were protected in 2016, environmental groups are already campaigning about the remaining 15%. Should they succeed, more jobs will be lost, mills will close, and they will point to it as further proof of an unsustainable industry.

And at the end of the day the public will still need wood. But rather than being sourced from our highly regulated and sustainably managed BC forests, it will increasingly come from parts of the world where environmental regulations are less strict, such as Brazil, Malaysia and Indonesia. Where forests are often not replanted. Out of sight, out of mind. That will be the real environmental tragedy.

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