



The BC SFM Public Opinion Survey

What do people think of BC forestry?

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Forest management has increasingly recognized the multiple benefits that forests provide, such as wood products, biological services, contributions to quality of life, and non-timber products. One significant influence on forest management in British Columbia is sustainable forest management (SFM) certification, which seeks to demonstrate that forest management practices are ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable. Incorporating meaningful opportunities for public involvement in discussions about forest management and planning is an important component of SFM.

One mechanism to incorporate public participation into forest management decision making is the public advisory group (PAG), which seeks broad-based representation from the local community. A PAG provides regular comment on forest management plans and addresses issues of general concern. At a typical PAG meeting, for instance, public representatives and lay people interact with forest managers and members of the scientific community to discuss forest management issues

and strategies. One of the difficulties facing PAGs is that they must represent the concerns and values of multiple constituencies, and yet information (and perhaps knowledge) about these constituencies is not generally available. To tackle this difficulty, residents in nine forestry-based communities with PAGs were mailed a copy of the BC SFM Public Opinion Survey. Although several studies of public opinion and perceptions about SFM have taken place in British Columbia, a systematic and broad testing of public attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions relating to comprehensive SFM criteria and indicators had not been done.

The BC SFM Public Opinion Survey's primary purpose is to inform PAGs of residents' opinions and beliefs about SFM. The survey questions elicit responses that detail local concerns about particular forest management issues. The information obtained permits PAG members to better understand and represent their communities on a range of issues critical to forest management. This project also reflects an attempt to improve

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Ajit Krishnaswamy photo

Participants at the British Columbia Community Forestry Association saw examples of value-added manufacturing, including this cedar stump planter from Cedar Three Products. See story on page 20.



More than half agree: SFM practices are positive

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both how PAGs deliberate on SFM issues and how they influence discussions about appropriate forest management practices in and near their communities.

Communities in nine Canfor Divisions were surveyed in 2006 (Ft. Nelson, Ft. St. James, Houston, Prince George, Quesnel, and Radium Hot Springs/Invermere) and 2007 (Ft. St. John, Mackenzie, and Vanderhoof). To date, more than 2,700 completed questionnaires have been received. The 12-page survey collected a wealth of information about resident opinion on a range of issues. For example, respondents reflected on the following forest values and functions:

- Current forest management issues in the province
- General sustainability issues
- Economic contributions of forestry
- Priorities for sustaining forest values
- Satisfaction with forest management outcomes
- Monitoring the management of forest values
- Importance of local forest management objectives
- Local forest management issues
- Management of rare plants and wildlife
- Climate change and forest management
- Experiences with outdoor recreation

We highlight here a few of the notable results from the six communities that were surveyed in 2006.

More than one-half of respondents (55.2%) agreed that, overall, SFM practices produce positive results for the local community. This suggests that although many in timber-dependent communities realize the approach translates to on-the-ground outcomes, much work is still required to broaden the relevancy of SFM to members of the public as almost half of all respondents did not recognize local benefits of SFM.


Interestingly, almost two-thirds of respondents agreed that British Columbia citizens need more opportunities for input into forest management; however, less than one-half indicated that they knew enough about forests and forestry to provide meaningful input into forestry planning decisions. This suggests that the desire exists to become involved in SFM, but that citizens need to feel better informed to make meaningful contributions to forest management discussions. This finding also highlights the difficulty that forest managers face when attempting to engage the public in forest

management discussions—foresters typically try many approaches to elicit involvement, yet these often fail to resonate with the public. It is possible, given the proportion of respondents who indicated they did not know enough about forestry, that people may lack the confidence to participate in public venues (i.e., not anonymously). Public opinion surveys, as anonymous instruments, can therefore make valuable contributions to forest management discussions. Public debate and discussion also play a vital role and may require more effective outreach efforts to increase people's knowledge and strengthen their confidence in forestry issues.

One surprising survey result was the different connections that respondents had with forests. When asked to identify their main points of connection with forests from a list of 21 common interest areas, the five most frequently cited were:

- non-motorized recreation (62.5%),
- motorized recreation (49.4%),
- forestry (49.2%),
- the environment (28.7%), and
- photography (25.1%).

Non-motorized recreation represented the only connection with forests that the majority of respondents identified. The prominent role that recreation provides in linking people to forested environments is reflected in the SFM approach, which recognizes the importance of social values in forest management; providing a diversity of opportunities for recreation could become an important forest management outcome.

More than three-quarters (76.2%) of respondents *strongly or mildly agreed* that managing the beetle situation is a priority *even if there is a negative impact on other resource values in the short-term*. Given the magnitude of the mountain pine beetle problem, respondents' proximity to affected areas, and broad media coverage, this response is not surprising. Responses to this question imply that residents are willing to accept unspecified negative impacts to other resource values in order to properly address the mountain pine beetle infestation. Respondents also recognized that beetle management options could also have consequences for other forest values. Although some respondents expressed difficulty in making management outcome trade-offs (like this one; there were others in the survey), these questions served to remind the public that all resource values are not likely to occur everywhere all of the time, and that forest managers are constantly faced with these sorts of decisions. 

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BC SFM Public Opinion Survey Web Site: <http://www.sfm-pos.ca/>