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Timber Salvage near Ptarmigan Creek, east of Prince George

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The Robson Valley, 200 kilometres southeast of Prince George, went through a drought in the early 1990s that made hemlock and cedar stands susceptible to caterpillars of the hemlock looper moth, one of the most destructive defoliators of conifers in BC. After repeated defoliation, many hemlock and cedar trees in a 40,000-hectare area were killed. The dead trees are being salvaged under forest licences.

One such licence was issued to a value-added manufacturer specializing in cedar products (posts, fencing, boards, shakes and shingles). The licensee's mill can use the outer shell of old, core-rotted cedars that standard mills have difficulty using. The licensee was also able to trade hemlock logs for cedar with other forest companies.

However, the sale price for hemlock pulp declined from very high in 1995 to very low in 1997 and thereafter. The licensee could no longer trade hemlock logs with other forest companies for cedar. The Ministry of Forests district manager was very satisfied with the licensee's performance in economically challenging stands. To keep the licensee's mill operating, the district manager temporarily relaxed the forest licence conditions so that the licensee could take only 60 percent of the harvest from moderately to severely-damaged stands and the remaining 40 percent from lightly damaged stands. This change was reviewed from time to time and adjusted to reflect changing market conditions.

The complainant objected to the amount of green wood the licensee was allowed to take. The district manager allowed the licensee to submit a one-year forest development plan while various concerns were resolved. However, the approved plan allowed the licensee to take over 50 percent of the harvest from lightly damaged stands in one year, not 40 percent as stipulated for the multi-year forest licence. That caused the complainant additional concern.

Many of the complainant's concerns were with the forest licence, not the forest development plan. Forest licences are issued under the Forest Act, not the Code, and the Board cannot investigate those. The complainant was also concerned that the forest development plan was not consistent with sound forest management in the Interior cedar-hemlock biogeoclimatic zone. That concern was within the Board's jurisdiction.

The Board found that the district manager complied with the Code in approving the forest development plan. However, the complainant's concerns went beyond compliance to include harvest of healthy trees, a shortage of protected areas, fragmentation of ancient forests and diminished visual quality. The complainant also believed the harvesting did not mimic natural disturbance patterns by leaving small uneven-aged or multi-storied even-aged stands.

The district manager stated that he was satisfied the plan would adequately manage and conserve forest resources, including timber, water, wildlife, fisheries, recreation and biological diversity. He did not explain his reasons, but the plan itself outlined various measures to protect these forest resources. Accumulations of logging debris would be spread out over the cutblocks to reduce visual impact and to improve biodiversity by leaving coarse woody debris. Individual wildlife trees and wildlife tree patches would be retained. Proposed cutblocks were small (4 to 60 hectares) and irregular, imitating the natural disturbance pattern. A partial cut silviculture system was proposed, with varied patterns and targets for retaining trees and shade. That would also reduce visual impacts.

In the meantime, new information was becoming available. A new timber supply review was under way. The licensee was to re-evaluate the extent of looper damage. Protected areas had been set out in the Prince George Land and Resource Management Plan. Government and the complainant had recently been alerted to the unique attributes of the Interior cedar-hemlock ecosystem through a scientific conference. The district was accelerating landscape unit planning and a visual inventory was being updated.

The Board found it acceptable that over 50 percent of the volume approved in the one-year forest

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development plan was to come from lightly damaged stands. The percentage can be adjusted over several years under the forest licence to compensate, if necessary. The Board also concluded that the district manager had enough relevant information to be satisfied that the biodiversity maintenance provisions in the forest development plan would adequately manage and conserve the forest resources of the area, but again only because the plan had only a one-year term.

The next forest development plan, which must cover five years and not just one, will have to reflect controversial operations in a relatively poorly understood forest type. That forest development plan will have to incorporate the new and best information available on sound forest management in the old stands in the interior cedar hemlock biogeoclimatic zone.

