

**Adequacy of the Notice of
Public Review and Comment for Ten
Forest Development Plans on Northern
Vancouver Island**

Final Report - Complaint 950082

April 1998

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SUMMARY

This report concludes the Board's investigation of a complaint about the adequacy of the advertised notice announcing that the public had an opportunity to review and comment on ten forest development plans in the Port McNeill Forest District on northern Vancouver Island.

Nature of the Complaint

A complaint was filed with the Board in August 1996 about the way ten forest development plans in the Port McNeill Forest District on northern Vancouver Island were advertised for public review and comment. The complainant requested that their name be kept confidential and the Board agreed to the request. The complainant was represented in all discussions by its agent, the Sierra Legal Defence Fund.

The complaint focused on the acceptability of the notice advertised in early 1996 by the licensee, International Forest Products, announcing that the plans were available for public review and comment.

Shortly after the licensee placed the notice in the *North Island Gazette*, the complainant's agent informed the district manager that the complainant considered the notice to be flawed because it did not include the name or phone number of a person to contact for further information, and included no information about alternative times and places for the public to review the plans. The district manager was asked to require that the plans be re-advertised for a further 60-day public review and comment period. The district manager decided not to require re-advertising of the notice of public review, but did not advise the complainant's agent of his decision until approximately four months later. The complaint was then filed with the Board

The Board's Decision to Investigate

The Board must investigate complaints about forest practices described in Parts 3-6 of the Act, unless there is reason to refuse to investigate. In October 1996, following the assessment of the complaint, the Board decided to investigate whether the notice of public review for the ten forest development plans met the requirements of the Forest Practices Code.

Investigation Findings

The Board finds that the notice of public review advertised by the licensee for the ten forest development plans met the requirements of the Forest Practices Code. The district manager complied with the requirements of the Act and regulations when he decided to accept the notice. However, the Board is of the opinion that the notice should have included additional information, as suggested in the *Public Consultation Guidebook*.

The notice should have included at least a contact name and phone number for the licensee and better descriptions of the geographic location of the areas covered by the plans. Other public notification methods such as local radio advertisements and letters to potentially interested individuals or groups, as suggested in the guidebook, should also have been considered, given the remoteness of many of the plan areas.

Despite the deficiencies in the notice, the Board concludes that that there may not have been any adverse affect on the public, in the circumstances of this complaint. There was no evidence found to indicate that any person was unable to provide comment on the plans. The Board finds that the district manager's decision to accept this notice without additional information was reasonable in the circumstances.

The Board also finds that the process of making the decision was unfair to the complainant because of the district manager's delay in advising the complainant of his decision not to require re-advertisement of the public notice.

The problem of inadequate public notices has since been corrected. District staff now give specific direction to licensees on the guidebook provisions to ensure clarity in future public notices of opportunities for review and comment. Since five of the plans were approved shortly after the Board received the complaint and the other five, including the three plans of most interest to the complainant, were not submitted to the ministry for approval, the Board found no further practical remedies for the resolution of the complaint.

Recommendations

The Board recommends that the district manager expand the district's requirements for public notification by including additional notification methods, such as radio announcements and direct correspondence, as outlined in the *Public Consultation Guidebook*.

The Board also recommends that the Ministry of Forests revise the *Public Consultation Guidebook* and the *Forest Development Plan Guidebook* to include suggestions about making alternative arrangements for interested persons to view operational plans if scheduled times or locations are inconvenient.

INVESTIGATION

On August 13, 1996, an organization complained to the Board about a notice advertising ten forest development plans on and around northern Vancouver Island for public review and comment. The complainant requested that their name be kept confidential and the Board agreed to the request. The complainant was represented in all discussions by its agent, the Sierra Legal Defence Fund.

The notice was placed by the licensee, International Forest Products in the local newspaper, the *North Island Gazette*, and in the *B.C. Gazette*. The complaint was that the notice failed to provide the name and address or phone number of a person to contact for further information, and included no information about alternative times and places to review the plans.

The complainant maintained that the notice provided inadequate information and may have limited the opportunity for public review and comment by persons interested or affected by operations under the plans, and did not comply with the requirements of section 4 of the *Operational Planning Regulation*. The complainant was concerned that the notices implied that the only public review opportunity available was at five public open-house meetings held between May 4-9, 1996, rather than throughout the minimum 60-day period required by the regulation.

Method of Investigation

Since there was no issue about forest practices at any specific site, the investigation conducted by the Board did not include an on-site visit. The investigation was conducted entirely through a series of phone calls and written correspondence, beginning in October 1996.

Shortly after this complaint was filed, the Board revised its investigation approach to ensure that face-to-face meetings between Board staff and participants are an integral part of the investigation process for all complaints. In this case, the Board is satisfied that the telephone and correspondence investigative techniques were sufficient to conduct the investigation.

The Board's investigation focused on whether the district manager's decision to accept the notice regarding the availability of the ten forest development plans for public review and comment complied with the requirements of the Forest Practices Code and whether it was reasonable and fair. The Board considered three questions:

1. Did the district manager comply with the requirements of the Act and regulations?
2. Was the district manager's decision to accept the notice reasonable?
3. Was the process used to arrive at the decision fair?

INVESTIGATION FINDINGS

Compliance with Code Requirements

Section 39 of the Act requires the holder of a major forest licence, if required by the regulations, to make a forest development plan available to the public for review and comment before submitting it to a district manager for approval. These requirements are set out in sections 2 to 4 of the *Operational Planning Regulation*.

Section 2(1) of the *Operational Planning Regulation* provides additional detail on the form that the notice providing information about the public's opportunity to review and comment must take:

2.(1) Before

(a) a person submits a forest development plan...for approval...the person...must publish a notice, ***in a form acceptable to the district manager***, in the Gazette and in a newspaper (emphasis added).

The licensee advertised a notice describing the availability of its forest development plans for public review in the *BC Gazette* (March 27, 1996) and in two successive editions of Port Hardy's *North Island Gazette* (March 27 and April 3, 1996). There are no other community newspapers in the vicinity of the areas covered by the ten plans.

The notice is shown in Appendix 1. It invited the public to view and comment on the forest development plans and listed the times and locations of five open-house sessions to be held in Port Hardy between May 4 and 9, 1996. It briefly described the forest development plans and indicated that such plans are updated annually. The deadline for comments was set as June 3, 1996, with comments to be sent to the licensee's area engineer, for whom a mailing address was included.

The complainant was concerned that the notice made no mention of a phone number or the street address of an office for the public to obtain further information. Neither was there any indication that the plans could also be viewed during working hours at the licensee's offices. After some effort, the complainant's agent was able to contact the licensee and arrange to view the plans at times other than those specified. However, the complainant remained concerned that other members of the public might simply take the notice at face value, assume the plans could only be viewed at one of the open-house sessions, and therefore not review the plans if they could not attend one of those sessions.

The district manager told the Board that his staff routinely reviewed public notices by licensees, and had done so prior to the enactment of the Act. He took the position that he would find a notice acceptable if basic legislated requirements had been met. Other than the requirement set by section 2(1) of the regulation, there is no legislated requirement concerning the features of an acceptable notice. Specifically, there is no requirement that

a contact person or phone number be specified, or that public viewing opportunities other than open-house meetings be arranged. Consequently the district manager did not require that such information be included. He was satisfied that the notice was in an acceptable form.

Finding #1.

The Board finds that the district manager complied with the Code requirements in making the decision to approve the advertised notices for the ten forest development plans. A district manager has the discretion to find a notice for a forest development plan to be acceptable if it meets the legislated requirements. As section 2 of the *Operational Planning Regulation* had no legislated requirement for advertised notices to include a contact person or phone number, or that alternative public viewing opportunities be specified, a district manager had the discretion to decide that the notice was acceptable.

Reasonableness of the Decision

The *Operational Planning Regulation* gives the district manager broad discretion to decide whether or not a notice is acceptable. Therefore, the Board examined the district manager’s exercise of that discretion to consider whether the decision was reasonable and whether the process was fair. Discretionary decisions must meet legislated standards but should also be guided by such factors as policy statements and administrative guidelines.

To assess whether the decision was reasonable, the Board considered a number of factors, such as:

- past and current public response to information forums such as open house sessions on forestry issues,
- indications of public interest in the ten FDPs identified in the complaint,
- public expectations as raised by the guidebooks,
- familiarity of district staff with local public interest,
- effectiveness of the local newspaper advertisement in reaching members of the public in the area affected by the ten FDPs, and
- past and current district involvement in public notice.

The Board placed particular weight on suggestions about public notice of plans made in several Forest Practices Code guidebooks. Like policies, guidebooks are not legally binding; in effect, they are carefully prepared suggestions that should not be taken lightly. The Board took the guidebooks as reflecting reasonable public expectations regarding public notice. In the Board's view, the guidebooks provide essential guidance to decision-makers to ensure that the Forest Practices Code objectives are achieved.

The *Public Consultation Guidebook*, published and distributed in September 1995, makes a number of suggestions on the advertising format for notice of public review of forest development plans. The suggestions include:

- “Newspaper advertisements for forest development plans should contain:
- forest licence number...
 - purpose of the plan review
 - location, date and time of public viewing
 - indication of whether other operational plans or higher-level plans will be available for viewing
 - indication that a representative of the proponent will be on hand to answer questions.” (page 3)

All of these elements were included in the notice that the district found to be acceptable. However, the guidebook also suggests additional information that was not included:

- “geographical area (including distance and direction from nearest community)
- contact name and phone number for more information.” (page 3)

The lack of a contact name and phone number was a specific basis for this complaint. The complainant also stressed that the notice did not include information regarding the availability of alternative arrangements for review and comment. While the text of the *Public Consultation Guidebook* does not refer explicitly to alternative arrangements, the example format used in the guidebook does:

- “If any interested parties are unable to review the proposed plans during these times, arrangements can be made to view the plan at a time convenient for them.” (page 4)

The guidebook also provides information on the recommended size of the notice, how to select appropriate newspapers in which to advertise, and how often the notice should be run. In the circumstances of this complaint, those suggestions were followed. Other suggestions in the guidebook were not followed. There was no indication that the following guidebook suggestions were considered:

- “Notification by radio is also encouraged for remote areas where people (such as trappers and guide outfitters) do not have access to a newspaper, local government office or forest district office.” (page 2)
- “Forest district staff, with the assistance of major licensees, should assemble a mailing list of interested members of the public and aboriginal groups with traditional territories in the district. The names of groups and/or individuals who are interested in proposed development activities can be solicited through any combination of media advertisements (newspaper, radio, television), public meetings, open houses and/or questionnaires. Direct contact should also be made with public advisory groups, associations, special interest groups, and/or

individuals known to have an immediate interest in local land and resource management issues. Licensees should be provided with copies of the ‘final’ list and encouraged to contact groups and/or individuals as appropriate for their planning areas.” (page 8)

- “In addition to newspaper advertising, public notices advising the public of opportunities for plan review should be placed in different public locations such as postal stations, public libraries and/or municipal/regional district offices in the vicinity of proposed operations.” (page 8)

Most of this information is repeated at pp. 43-44 of the *Forest Development Plan Guidebook* which was produced to assist licensees in preparing forest development plans. That guidebook was released in December 1995. It was distributed to district offices in January 1996, approximately two months before the notices were published in March, but was not implemented generally until very shortly before the circumstances of this complaint began.

Finding #2.

The Forest Practices Code guidebooks provide essential guidance to decision-makers to ensure that the Forest Practices Code objectives are achieved. In the Board’s view, this complaint would have been avoided had the district followed the suggestions for advertising public notices contained in the Forest Practices Code guidebooks, particularly the *Public Consultation Guidebook*.

The complainant was concerned that, given the remote nature of the areas under the FDPs, affected members of the public might not have been aware of the public review and comment process. The *North Island Gazette* might not be available in every village, community, camp, residence and even vessel on the remote mid-coast. The complainant suggested that radio, and even directed correspondence, should be used to supplement the advertised notice. The Board agreed with the complainant’s concern.

Finding #3.

As suggested in an example in the *Public Consultation Guidebook*, notice of public review and comment in remote areas should normally include as much information as practical and should be advertised by methods broader than newspaper advertisements alone, such as correspondence and radio. The Board finds that limiting the notice to local newspaper advertising was too narrow, given the remote nature of the plan areas and widely distributed population on northern Vancouver Island and the adjacent mainland.

On the other hand, the district manager maintained that there had been a long history of low public interest in the ten plan areas being reviewed. Even the complainant appeared

to be interested in only three of the ten plan areas. The level of public interest was gauged by the district manager based on his experience in the district and confirmed by the low attendance at the open-house sessions. Most of the local public were, in the district manager's experience, directly or indirectly reliant on the forestry sector. The local public was generally supportive of plans for forest development and provided little input. In addition, the district manager had been informed by the complainant's agent and the licensee that neither party knew of any individual or organization, other than the complainant, who had found the notice inadequate.

The Board acknowledged the district's experience with local public input. However, the district manager's reasoning was somewhat circular. If, as the Board concluded, the notice itself was missing some information essential to the public about the opportunities for review and comment, then that lack might have prevented some more remote members of the public from expressing their interest to district staff. The Board considered that the district manager had applied a partially inappropriate test to determine the level of public interest in the plan areas.

Finding #4

Past indications of low public interest in the ten forest development plan areas in the communities of Port McNeill and Port Hardy was a questionable test for the district manager to use to assess the degree of public interest in the area.

The Board considered that the district manager should not have presumed low public interest and should have required the licensee to include additional information in the public notice, as recommended in the guidebooks. However, while the Board disagreed in part with the district manager's approach, the Board did not consider the approach to be unreasonable in the circumstances. The notice, while flawed, did provide some information: a contact position (area engineer) and a mailing address (Port Hardy). Given the size of Port Hardy, the Board concluded that even an inexperienced, but interested, member of the public would have had enough information to be able to contact the licensee and arrange to review the plans.

Finding #5.

The Board finds that the information included in the notice of public review and comment for the forest development plans, while minimal, was adequate in the circumstances for public review and comment. In addition, the Board finds that, while the notice did not include all the information suggested by the guidebooks, it was reasonable for the district manager to have accepted the notice, given the circumstances.

The district manager has advised the Board that since the issue of the acceptability of notices regarding review of forest development plans has been brought to his attention, district staff have begun drawing licensees' attention to the guidebook recommendations.

The Board commends this action, which will reduce the likelihood of an inadequate notice being accepted in the future.

Finding #6.

Modification of district procedures since the complaint was filed has increased the likelihood that, in future, notices regarding review of forest development plans will contain additional information which will encourage public review by interested parties. The Board finds that current procedures used by the district should avoid any future complaints about the adequacy of the advertised notices for public review and comment of forest development plans.

Procedural Fairness

The Board considered whether the process used to make the decision was fair. One of the matters raised in the complaint was the district manager's delay in responding to the complainant's agent regarding the request that the notice be re-advertised.

The notice advertising the forest development plans for public review and comment was first published on March 27, 1996. The complainant's agent informed the district manager of concerns about the notice on April 18, 1996, requesting that the plans be advertised again with the additional contact information. Subsequent events, and questions about the fairness of the process in reaching a final decision, were complicated by an immediate misunderstanding between the complainant's agent and the district manager.

The complainant's concern was about the content of the notice, which dealt with all ten forest development plans. The district manager knew that the complainant had particular concerns about three of the forest development plans - the Klaskish, Cleagh Creek and Ahta plans. He assumed that the complainant's agent's request for re-advertising was directed at those three plans, not all ten. Therefore, the district manager refused to consider whether the plan reviews should be re-advertised until he knew whether the licensee actually intended to submit the three plans that concerned the complainant for approval.

By late May of 1996, the district manager had already decided that there was no need to require re-advertising of the seven forest development plans that he considered not to be of particular concern to the complainant. However, that was not clearly stated to the complainant's agent for some time. Before the district manager decided about re-advertising the Klaskish, Cleagh Creek and Ahta plans, he wanted to know whether those plans would actually be submitted by the licensee for approval. This misunderstanding, with the complainant concerned about the notice itself and the district manager assuming that the concern dealt with notice for only three plan areas, created an impression that the district manager deliberately delayed informing the complainant's agent of his ultimate

decision. Thus, inconclusive conversations between the district manager and the complainant's agent on this matter continued on June 3, June 11, and July 30, 1996, with the district manager continuing to state that he needed to make no decision on re-advertising unless plans were actually going to be submitted to him for approval. That position seemed increasingly unreasonable to the complainant's agent who believed that the notice had been inadequate, regardless of whether plans were ultimately submitted for approval or not.

The district manager did not categorically state that he had decided against re-advertising until an August 7 telephone conversation with the complainant's agent. By this time, the district manager knew that the forest development plans for the three areas of primary interest to the complainant, and two other areas, would definitely not be submitted for approval. Given the abandonment of those plans by the licensee, the district manager saw no need to re-advertise the plans. That position was not shared by the complainant; if the original notice was incomplete, it was irrelevant to the complainant whether the Klaskish, Cleagh Creek and Ahta plans were submitted for approval or not.

Finding #7.

The investigation revealed that the district manager decided at an early stage that he would not re-advertise seven of the ten plans but took four months to inform the complainant's agent. The Board finds that four months was a significant delay in informing the complainant's agent of the decision not to re-advertise the plans.

Regardless of the apparent misunderstanding between the district manager and the complainant about re-advertising the plans, the district manager's decision to delay making any decision on re-advertising the Klaskish, Cleagh Creek and Ahta plans for 16 weeks was surprising. Why did he need to await the licensee's decision on whether to submit those plans for approval? What would have happened if the district manager had learned in early August that the licensee was in fact going to submit those plans for approval? The operational disruption caused by re-advertising the forest development plans at that late date would have been greater than deciding to require re-advertise in early June. Either the form and content of the original public notice was adequate or it was not; the fate of three of the ten plans was irrelevant to that decision.

Finding #8.

Due to a misunderstanding, the district manager delayed informing the complaint's agent that he had decided not to re-advertise the notice until August 7, 1996 when he was informed that the Klaskish, Cleagh and Ahta plans would not be submitted for approval. The Board finds that this process was unfair to the complainant as a result of the nearly four month delay.

Problem Resolution Efforts

Where possible, the Board makes an effort to resolve disputes informally by facilitating communication between the parties or, on occasion, mediating with a view to exploring the issues that led to the dispute and arriving at a resolution acceptable to both parties.

In this case, the district manager's and complainant's positions polarized early in the process. The issues had been discussed many times before August 1996. As a result, the Board found it impractical to initiate or expedite problem resolution in the course of the investigation.

CONCLUSIONS

The Board finds that the notice of public review advertised by the licensee for the ten forest development plans met the requirements of the Forest Practices Code. The district manager complied with the requirements of the Act and regulations when he decided to accept the notice.

The Board concludes that the notice should have included additional information, as suggested in the *Public Consultation Guidebook*. In the Board's opinion, the newspaper advertisement should have included at least a contact name and phone number for the licensee and better descriptions of the geographic location of the areas of the plans. Other public notification methods, such as local radio advertisements and letters to potentially interested individuals or groups, should also have been considered, particularly given the remoteness of many of the plan areas.

Public review of forest development plans under the Code provides the only legislated opportunity the public has to provide input on operational plans. Adequate information and notification methods ensures that all interested and affected parties are made aware of the opportunity to review and comment.

In the circumstances of this complaint, the deficiencies in the notice may not have had any adverse affect on the public, as there was no evidence found to indicate that any person was unable to provide comment on the plans. While the evidence was not conclusive, there appeared to be little public interest in the forest development plans beyond the complainant, who was aware of the notice.

The Board finds that the district manager's decision to accept this notice was reasonable in the circumstances. The information in the notice, while considered inadequate, was not so deficient that it would have constrained the public's opportunity for review and comment.

The Board finds that the district manager delayed advising the complainant of his decision not to require re-advertisement of the plans. The effect of the delay was compounded by a misunderstanding between the complainant's agent and the district

manager about which plans were of concern to the complainant. On this basis, the Board finds that the process of making the decision was unfair to the complainant.

The problem of inadequate public notices has since been corrected by district staff giving specific direction to licensees on the guidebook provisions to ensure clarity in future public notices of opportunities for review and comment. The revised procedures in the district should prevent similar problems from occurring in the future.

Complaint Remedies

The complainant requested the following remedies from the Board:

1. Recommend that the district manager require that:
 - the licensee's forest development plans be re-noticed to comply with the Code and the *Public Consultation Handbook*
 - a further 60-day period be allowed for review and comment on the licensee's forest development plans
2. If the district manager refuses to require the licensee to re-notice and provide a 60-day period for review and comment, then the complainant calls upon the Board to request a review of this decision.

The Board, while considering the notice to have contained inadequate information, does not believe that the plans need to be re-advertised, particularly given the time that has elapsed since the circumstances arose. Additionally five of the ten plans, including the three of most interest to the complainant, were not submitted for approval.

The Board does not have authority under the Act to request an administrative review of this type of decision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation Specific to the Complaint

- The Board recommends that the district manager expand the district's requirements for public notification by including additional notification methods, such as radio announcements and direct correspondence, as outlined in the *Public Consultation Guidebook*, particularly for those FDPs in remote areas.

Recommendation on the Notice of Public Review and Comment Generally

- The Ministry of Forests should revise the *Public Consultation Guidebook* and the *Forest Development Plan Guidebook* to include suggestions about making alternative arrangements for the interested persons to view operational plans if scheduled times or locations are inconvenient (as is currently included in the example newspaper advertisement in the *Public Consultation Guidebook*).

Appendix 1

Notices advertising forest development plans for public review and comment.

Appendix 2

Chronology of Events

The Board found the following events to be relevant to the complaint:

1995

18-20 September Ministry of Forests distributes *Public Consultation Guidebook* to district offices.

1996

January Ministry of Forests distributes *Forest Development Plan Guidebook* by mail to Ministry Publication Officers for distribution to district offices, including Port McNeill.

27 March Licensee places notice (Appendix 1) in *North Island Gazette* published in Port Hardy and *B.C. Gazette* announcing that forest development plans for ten areas will be available for public review from May 4-9, 1996, in Port Hardy, with comments required by June 3.

3 April Licensee places second notice in the *North Island Gazette*.

18 April Complainant's agent meets with district manager and expresses particular interest in three of the ten plan areas: Klaskish River, Cleagh Creek and Ahta River.

4, 6-9 May Licensee holds open house meetings in Port Hardy for review of plans. Thirteen people attend May 4 meeting. Complainant does not attend but complainant's agent arranges with licensee to review the plans at an alternative location on May 31.

27 May Complainant's agent calls district manager to raise concerns about the inadequate notice provided by the licensee and asks him to require the licensee to go through a second public notice. Complainant's agent also asks to be made aware of forest development plan ads for other areas; district manager later follows up by ensuring that licensees provide such information directly to the complainant's agent. district manager encourages complainant's agent to speak to the licensee directly. Complainant's agent does so. Licensee's operations engineer refuses to make a commitment to re-notice the plans, but promises to speak with the district manager.

1996

- 31 May Complainant's agent visits licensee's office in Port Hardy to review two of the forest development plans. Licensee indicates that, having discussed with the district manager the question of republishing the notice, it has decided not to do so.
- 3 June Final day of the public review period. Complainant's agent submits comments on one of the forest development plans. The comments call attention to the inadequacy of the notice and request re-noticing. There were no submissions by other members of the public on the ten proposed forest development plans.
- Complainant's agent again speaks to the district manager, who states that he will not make any decision about re-advertising the notice unless or until the plans are submitted for approval. (The district manager at that point had already decided not to consider re-advertising the notice for the seven plan areas that were not of special interest to the complainant, but did not specifically state his decision to the complainant's agent.)
- 7 June district manager approves one forest development plan for Shoal Harbour.
- 11 June Complainant's agent speaks to district manager, who again indicates he will decide to require republication only if the plans are to be submitted for approval.
- 30 July district manager states that he has not required the licensee to re-notice the forest development plans.
- 7 August district manager learns that the Klaskish, Cleagh Creek and Ahta forest development plans (of greatest concern to the complainant) will not be submitted by the licensee to the district manager for approval. As a result, the district manager formally decides that he considers the public review to have been adequate and advises the complainant's agent by telephone that he will not require the forest development plans to be put out for public review again.
- 13 August Agent files complaint on behalf of the complainant with Forest Practices Board.
- 13 August District offices receive policy advising that licensees should send their public review notices to district offices for review and approval of the content, including provisions for contact numbers and alternative arrangements for viewing, including times beyond normal working hours.

1996

- 10 December district manager approves second, third and fourth forest development plans.
- 13 December district manager approves fifth and last of the ten forest development plans put out for review and comment in March. (The remaining five forest development plans, including the Klaskish, Cleagh Creek and Ahta plans, were not submitted by the licensee to the district manager for approval.)

