



B.C. not on track to meet milestones for old-growth, First Nations and forestry transition

March 11th, 2021



Photos: TJ Watt

Context

Six months ago, on September 11, 2020, the B.C. government published the [report from its old-growth strategic review panel](#) and committed to the 14 recommendations within. After meeting with people from across the province, the independent panel found that many old-growth ecosystems are at increasingly severe risk of species loss and concluded that a paradigm shift was needed to respond to the biodiversity crisis. The panel highlighted that the B.C. government had failed for decades to follow through with past recommendations or strategies that could have prevented the old-growth crisis the province is faced with today.

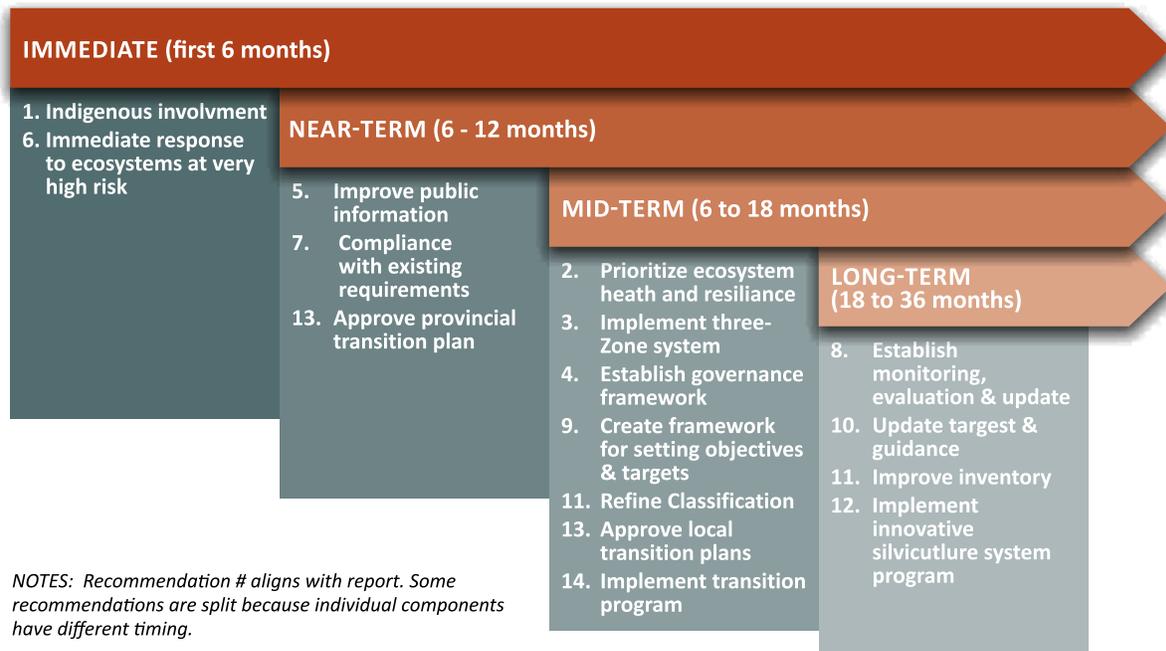
A moment of hope for old-growth in the fall of 2020

In its response, the B.C. government acknowledged¹ for the first time that provincial old-growth management had “caused a loss of biodiversity” and the “need to do better.” Importantly, the panel and the B.C. government recognized what Indigenous Peoples have been saying all along: Indigenous governments must have a say in decisions about what

1. <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020FLNR0058-001711>

happens on their land. The following month, during the snap-election campaign, Premier Horgan promised that this government is “committed to implementing the report in its totality.”

For the first time in decades, in the fall of 2020, it seemed like the door to protecting what little remains of the last ancient giants across the province cracked open. It appeared there was reason to hope — a welcome reprieve from the despair we’ve become accustomed to considering how few big old trees are left standing and how fast they are being cut down.



In its report, the independent panel outlines a blueprint for how the B.C. government can work with Indigenous governments to address risks to old-growth ecosystems and reform forest stewardship within three years (graphic from page 67 of the panel report).

March 2020: The sobering reality

Six months later, however, the reality is sobering: the vast majority of at-risk forests remain open for logging and the B.C. government has not yet committed to a framework with implementation milestone dates or funding for the implementation process, Indigenous-led conservation solutions and the transition in the forestry sector to prepare for the inevitable end of old-growth logging.

As part of the immediate response, the old-growth panel recommended a halt on logging in all at-risk old-growth within six months. According to ecologists, however, only 3,800 ha of the 353,000 ha within the deferral areas announced in September 2020 were at-risk old forest, leaving the vast majority of the most endangered forests unprotected.²

The [independent “Last Stand” report](#) showed in 2020 only 415,000 hectares of old-growth forests with big and very big trees remained (less than 1 per cent of BC’s total forest area). It also showed that 75 per cent of these last critical stands remain unprotected and open to logging.³ This ecological emergency demands immediate action and a precautionary approach.

It is important to note that while it’s now been six months since the government published the report, it received it from the panel on April 30, 2020. By any measure, the government has failed to meet the six month timeline set by the panel.

The case for change

Protecting endangered old-growth sustains irreplaceable environmental services vital for our health, safety and well-being, reduces climate risks such as droughts, flooding and fire, which are made worse by clearcutting,⁴ safeguards natural carbon sinks,⁵ and supports economic diversification (e.g. tourism, recreation, conservation revenue).

Deferrals and other mechanisms to immediately halt logging in B.C.’s at-risk old forests are essential to protect biodiversity province-wide, leave opportunities available for economic diversification of First Nations and forest-based communities, and allow time for successful implementation of the old-growth panel recommendations.

Support for immediate deferrals was echoed in a September 2020 UBCIC resolution calling for logging deferrals to encompass “all threatened old-growth forests.”⁶ Shortly after, Grand Chief Stewart Phillip called for chainsaws to be put down while discussions take place, saying “It makes no sense to have a protracted dialogue if, at the end of it, we discover

2. <https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-forests-logging-nine-protected-areas/>

3. <https://veridianecological.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/bcs-old-growth-forest-report-web.pdf>

4. <https://sierraclub.bc.ca/intact-forests-safe-communities-sierra-club-bc-report/>

the old-growth is gone.⁷ To ensure comprehensive, long-term protection of old-growth ecosystems, the old-growth panel recommended the B.C. government enact new legislation within 6-18 months that prioritizes ecosystem health and biodiversity of forests.

The panel also recommended the government take steps to address the ongoing decline in B.C.'s forest sector, as evidenced by mill curtailments and closures, labour disputes and market uncertainty. The B.C. government can save and create jobs by ending raw log exports and investing in value-added wood product manufacturing, government stewardship, ecoforestry and restoration.

Economic analysis shows that the economic value of the benefits of endangered old-growth forests is greater than the short-term profit from logging it.⁸ In fact, B.C.'s forestry sector in its current form has become so uneconomic that provincial expenses have surpassed revenue for over a decade.⁹ The forest sector crisis is complex and multifaceted, but continued logging of the last big old trees is no solution, because they are non-renewable, considering time-scales and climate change.

There is growing support for old-growth protection (polling shows 92 per cent support, 83 - 97 per cent in all regions of B.C.)¹⁰ as evidenced by diverse groups speaking out, including First Nations and forest industry workers.

Both Canada and the US are now committed to the global initiative seeking protection of 30 per cent protection of lands and waters by 2030, with emphasis on high biodiversity and irreplaceable natural carbon sinks. Mapping of these values shows there are few regions in North America and globally that could contribute more to this goal than B.C. and inspire other parts of the world to address the biodiversity and climate crisis.

The new national commitments present an unprecedented opportunity for B.C. to make equivalent commitments, seek partnerships with billion dollar federal and private funding initiatives (like Bezos Earth Fund) and become a global leader in the movement to support Indigenous peoples in protecting Earth's most biodiverse regions.

This includes regions where First Nations are taking leadership roles in conservation - places like Clayoquot Sound and the Great Bear Rainforest. These regions require ongoing provincial leadership to ensure Indigenous-led conservation models are successful and don't slide backwards as a result of lack of provincial commitment for new land use and conservation frameworks and economic alternatives to logging.

Immediate measures (e.g. deferrals and funding for economic relief) support reconciliation with First Nations and advance B.C.'s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA), safeguarding First Nations cultural resources and creating opportunities for old-growth protection to be incorporated into Indigenous-led land-use planning, new governance models and economic initiatives while there is still old-growth forest left.

Recommendations

To make the promised paradigm shift a reality the B.C. government must:

- immediately enact deferrals or other mechanisms to halt harvest of at-risk forests as outlined in the old growth panel report, particularly the last old-growth forests with big and very big trees.
- expedite work with Indigenous governments around long term forest management direction
- allocate funding to:
 - Temporarily relieve economic pressure faced by First Nations communities to permit logging deferrals and other immediate measures,
 - Support economic alternatives for First Nations and transition in the forestry sector,
 - Support Indigenous-led land-use planning processes and the creation and stewardship of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas.
- Direct statutory decision-makers, including the Chief Forester and district managers, to prioritize ecosystem integrity and biodiversity in executing their duties while legislation to implement this priority across all sectors is being developed.
- introduce amendments to the Forests and Range Practices Act prepared prior to pandemic in the spring 2021 sitting.
- Within 12-24 months from the report release date, enact legislation establishing ecosystem integrity and biodiversity as an overarching priority for all sectors.

5. <https://sierraclub.bc.ca/clearcutcarbon/>

6. <https://www.ancientforestalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/UBCIC-Resolution-2020-23.pdf>

7. <https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-first-nations-conservationists-finance-protect-old-growth/>

8. <http://rem-main.rem.sfu.ca/papers/knowler/Knowler-Dust.pdf>

9. <https://www.focusonvictoria.ca/issue-analysis/35/>

10. https://sierraclub.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/Factum_OldGrowthPoll_Oct2019-1.pdf

BC Government Old-growth Report Card

Date: March 11th, 2021

Premier: John Horgan

Last fall, Premier John Horgan made a big promise. He pledged his government would implement the old-growth panel recommendations 'in their totality.' The recommendations, which the government received in April and published September 11th, follow a three-year timeline (including short-term actions) and call for a paradigm shift to make ecological integrity and biodiversity the top priority. This report card grades how the government is doing six months after committing to this paradigm shift.

SUBJECT	PROGRESS	GRADE
Immediate action for at-risk forest (deferrals within 6 months)		D
<p>The old-growth panel calls for immediate interim protection of the most at-risk old-growth to prevent the loss of rare ecosystems. To date, government's deferrals only include about about 3,800 hectares, or less than 1% of the most at-risk old-growth. Logging continues in much of the remainder, and critical old-growth stands are being lost forever. To improve this grade, the BC government must immediately defer logging of all at risk old-growth in the province.</p>		
Three-year workplan with milestone dates		F
<p>The old-growth panel recommendations are embedded in a three-year framework with six month steps, starting with immediate action for at-risk forests and engagement with Indigenous governments, followed by a transition plan, a new framework prioritizing ecological integrity and alternatives to clearcutting. To date, the BC government has not tied its implementation promise to a work plan with milestone dates. Without such a step, the BC government remains unaccountable, meaning First Nations and forestry-dependent communities cannot count on support through the transition.</p>		
Funding for implementation, First Nations and forestry transition		F
<p>Significant provincial funding to support economic alternatives for First Nations and to enable a transition in the forest sector is fundamental to the successful implementation of the old-growth panel recommendations. This includes immediate funding to support First Nations seeking temporary economic relief while logging deferrals are put in place, as well as support for forestry workers. The BC government has yet to announce any funding commitments whatsoever, jeopardizing the success of many of the panel's recommendations. To improve this grade, it must immediately allocate funds to meet both short-term and long-term needs to secure Indigenous-led long-term conservation solutions and economic alternatives to old-growth logging.</p>		
Change course and prioritize ecosystem integrity and biodiversity		F
<p>The old-growth panel's call for a paradigm shift to prioritize conservation and management of ecosystem integrity and biodiversity across sectors requires an immediate course correction. This requires giving direction to statutory decision-makers like the chief forester and district managers to execute these priorities. As a first step, the BC government must immediately introduce delayed amendments to provincial forestry laws prepared prior to the pandemic.</p>		
Transparency and Communication		F
<p>The old-growth panel stressed the need to improve transparency and communication about ecosystems and forest management in order to rebuild public trust. Unfortunately, the government's communication around its response to the report has been inaccurate and misleading. The government has further alienated the public and jeopardized this process from the outset by classifying its initial measure as "353,000 hectares of old-growth protected" when much of this area is not old-growth and much of it is forest that is already protected. To get to a passing grade, government must correct misleading information and quickly share accurate data on how much at-risk old-growth remains unprotected and report on progress without false claims.</p>		