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Putting Theory into Practice Plenary

Putting the Theory of a Public Watchdog into Practice in the Changing World of Forest Management in British Columbia - British Columbia's Forest Practices Board.

Canada's first Forest Practices Board was established on January 1, 1995. In announcing the appointment of the Board, the provincial Minister of the Forests at the time described it as "the public's watchdog on effective forest management" in British Columbia.

The establishment of the Forest Practices Board in BC was part of a very ambitious set of changes implemented by the provincial government during a three year period when the management of British Columbia's forests was at the top of the provincial political agenda. One of the government's important forestry initiatives was to bring into law a Forest Practices Code that set requirements for forestry plans and practices such as logging and road construction, and established a regime of administrative penalties for contravening the Code. Importantly the Code established the Board as an independent organization with an obligation to respond to public concerns and to represent the public interest in sustainable forest practices.

That was the vision - the theory of creating an independent watchdog organization headed by a Board of knowledgeable members, to represent the public in ensuring that the Forest Practices Code was implemented, and that forest management, and public confidence in that management, was improved in British Columbia. Over the last three years, putting that theory into practice has been a challenge.

The Board is at the intersection of forestry, law, and public administration. It has been in the middle of an on-going public debate over forest management objectives and priorities in BC during a period of unprecedented change. The Board has faced a number of obstacles as we attempt to put the theory of a "public watchdog" into practice in an efficient and effective way in a highly controversial environment. These have included:

- obstacles to hiring staff and creating an independent infrastructure;
- an absence of policy and precedent, and a need to interpret new legislation;
- a gap between the public expectations and the legal mandate;
- a lack of clarity about the roles of the Chair, the Board as a whole and the staff;

- changing legislation.

Reality has confronted theory and the process of establishing an effective, credible and fair Board has taken much longer than anticipated.

In three short years, the Board has established its independence and has completed a considerable body of work. But there are still hurdles to overcome before the Board is the effective "public watchdog" that the Minister described in his announcement.