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British Columbia Forest Policy Reforms Needed for Sustainability

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British Columbia's forest management policies urgently require reform to sustain ecosystems and communities, and to help address the current climate and biodiversity crises. Priorities include 1) revised land use plans that protect more primary forest, 2) more realistic timber supply analyses, and 3) reformed forest tenures that better reflect community needs.

B.C.'s forests, particularly productive old growth, are critical for mitigating climate change and maintaining biodiversity. Retaining carbon-dense old forests is a very effective natural climate solution, key to meeting 2050 emissions targets. Old growth resists wildfire, ameliorates flooding and drought, reduces temperature, and provides climate refugia. B.C. bears a global responsibility for biodiversity and carbon sequestration because of its globally rare, productive, coastal and inland temperate rainforests. Increased retention also addresses Canada's commitment to protect 30% of representative ecosystems by 2030. Retention priorities were not adequately implemented following land-use planning in the 1990s, largely due to provincial policies that continued to favour industrial timber interests.

B.C.'s timber supply is declining and rural communities face crisis. Supply fall-downs have been anticipated for decades, but ignored by successive governments. Optimistic timber supply models, that underestimate the effects of disturbance and a changing climate, have contributed to unsustainable harvest rates, biodiversity declines and community instability. Additionally, preferential harvest of productive sites has left lower volume and higher cost stands, exposing mills to closures. Timber supply projections must include current science on growth rates, mortality, and climate change, and must partition harvest by productivity.

Over recent decades, forest jobs in B.C. have declined as a few large corporate players—including provincially-managed B.C. Timber Sales—dominate management, converting an inherited supply of old growth forest to short-term economic benefit. A forest tenure system that gives oversight to forest-based communities may better support Indigenous rights and sustain multiple ecological and social values.

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