

Re: Expedited Access to Fire-Damaged Timber

The BC Government recently announced that it is facilitating more rapid logging of burned forest in the province (<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2024FOR0015-000520>). While this is undoubtedly welcome news to loggers and forest companies, it remains to be seen whether there are any environmental benefits to the policy shift, or whether they might be outweighed by foreseeable negative impacts. Perhaps contrary to public opinion, the scientific community understands that burned forests are not wastelands but serve a number of useful functions: from long-term carbon storage and hydrological protection to habitat for specialized fire-adapted birds, insects, and plants. With the ecosystem already experiencing one shock from fire, additional stress caused by clearcut logging tends to further degrade ecological integrity, even if followed by tree planting.¹

The April 10th announcement cites the streamlining of approval and timber pricing policies as reflected in amendments to the Interior Appraisal Manual, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/forestry/competitive-forest-industry/timber-pricing/interior-timber-pricing/interior-appraisal-manual>. From an ecological or conservation biology perspective, the good news is that blowdown can no longer contribute to reserve areas within cutblocks, and wildfire salvage authorization requires at least 40% fire-damaged timber, compared to the previous default of 15% dead and damaged trees. This should reduce the scandalous number of surviving green trees that had been logged in the name of salvage activities in previous operations conducted following wildfires and bark beetle outbreaks. But it still means that more than half of the trees logged can be alive and growing, and could be providing important habitat and future timber supply. Furthermore, there is now no limit to the contiguous area of salvage harvest and recent cutblocks, which can be expected to have severe impacts to hydrological processes and many wildlife species. Nor is there any stated expectation of greater reserve areas being needed in salvage blocks or large areas subject to the cumulative effects of industrial forestry.

The main purpose of the 148-page Interior Appraisal Manual is to set a fair stumpage price or royalty to wood harvested from public land, payable to the people of BC. What is missing in the recent announcement, and is beyond the scope of an appraisal manual, is a clear and balanced policy for salvage logging in general. The announcement makes reference to salvage being suitable for 12-15% of recent wildfire areas in BC, so we are not likely to run short of those distinctive post-fire habitats at a provincial level ... but they might become rare in some landscapes. If salvage operations are redirected from old-growth harvesting, this would usually be favourable to biodiversity, but there is no such requirement. The appropriate balance for logging old, mature, and damaged forest needs to be determined locally on the basis of forest type and the natural disturbance regime, at the scale of individual landscape units. Statements from government and industry representatives claim that salvage operations will also set the stage for “restoration” of fire-damaged forest, but it is only commercial conifer trees (usually of

just one species) that will be “restored”, and most low- and moderate burn severity stands do not need restoration.

One can only hope that the promised forthcoming wildfire salvage guidebook will suitably address these many issues.

¹Lindenmayer, D. B., Burton, P. J., & Franklin, J. F. (2012). *Salvage Logging and its Ecological Consequences*. Island Press, Washington, DC.

Thorn, S., Bäessler, C., Brandl, R., Burton, P. J., Cahall, R., Campbell, J. L., ... & Müller, J. (2018). Impacts of salvage logging on biodiversity: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 55(1), 279-289.