

## FORESTRY COMMUNITY: NAKUSP

By Robin Brunet

Tom Zeleznik, mayor of Nakusp, vividly remembers the last time the livelihood of his village was turned upside down: in 1967, when the Columbia River Treaty led to the deliberate flooding of the Nakusp waterfront, industrial areas, and farmland in order to amalgamate the Arrow Lakes reservoir. “Over 270,000 acres of forest and rich arable land were wiped out,” he recalls. “For many residents, there was a huge sense they had to start over.”

Some things never change. Zeleznik, now 67, is working overtime to help save local jobs and a way of life threatened by the provincial government’s land use plan, which jeopardizes Nakusp companies such as Box Lake Lumber, a leading producer of split rail cedar fencing.

Zeleznik says, “About 50 per cent of Box Lake’s resource is dependent on old growth, and while outsiders may think that the company’s workforce of 40 people is no big deal, for a village of only 1,600 people it’s a substantial threat to our economy.”

But Zeleznik is hardly pessimistic: “You can’t be in this industry for any length of time without experiencing all sorts of challenges, and the province’s

protection of old growth is just the latest.” While locals, including Zeleznik value economic diversity such as tourism, they still view Nakusp as a town built on the resource industry. In fact, its settlement began in 1892 with the opening of a post office, store, and sawmill. By the 1930s a CP shipyard, forestry headquarters, and two sawmills were in operation, and surrounding lands were being farmed.

The importance of forestry to the local economy became obvious by the mid-20th century: Celgar began operations in 1951, making Nakusp the centre of a large pole and lumber industry. Today, Interfor Corporation is the leading player in the region: it took over the Nakusp office from Pope & Talbot Inc. in 2008.

Zeleznik retains the image of Nakusp as a forestry town as he recounts his youth, which consisted of spending his teenage years as a chokerman, moving on (after graduating school) to becoming a faller, and ultimately focusing on log scaling—a pursuit that he maintains today.

Zeleznik’s long career helps explain why he became a village councilor and then, four years ago, mayor. “There are over 270 full-time forestry, community forests and value-added jobs in Nakusp

and the surrounding area, as well as over 400 full- and part-time spin-off jobs, plus Interfor is one of our major economic bases—and yet, the importance of forestry to our local economy is frequently overlooked,” he says. “So, I wanted to give back to the community that has given so much to our family over the years.”

As with any small town in BC, a lot goes on in Zeleznik’s jurisdiction. The Nakusp & Area Community Forest (NACFOR), which is 100 per cent owned by the Village of Nakusp, manages 9,192 hectares of land base within the Regional District of Central Kootenay. The harvest is an average of 20,000 cubic metres, about 500 truckloads of timber per year.

An example of a recent community rally initiative is the non-profit Arrow Lakes Caribou Society, which was formed in 2019 to aid regional caribou recovery efforts. Membership includes representation from outdoor recreational groups; local industry such as forestry, tourism and mining; and the local and regional governments.

As for Box Lake Lumber, it has been held up as a prime example of how a value-added operation can benefit regional forestry overall. However, government’s



deferral of old growth means it has lost half the supply it needs to make its split rail fencing, landscaping logs, and other wood products. “We are trying to find a way forward—we are trying to find a transitional phase,” owner Dan Wiebe told media in March, adding that he’s looking at a one-year window to make the transition.

Zeleznik began a campaign of government consultation (with what he stresses has seen strong support from Interfor) by reaching out to the minister responsible for forests, Katrine Conroy. Since then, several meetings between the mayor, Dan Wiebe, and provincial authorities have taken place, with Zeleznik aware that transitioning to other types of employment will be inevitable for some of his industry workers. “But opportunities definitely exist,” he says.

Even though its jobs are generally low paying, Zeleznik is grateful that tourism continues to grow in his neck of the woods. “Professional mountain bikers now come here from all over the world,” he says. “Also, to help attract young professionals to our region we’re working with Telecoms and local ISPs to establish a high-speed Internet infrastructure.

“Additionally, we are also badly in need of truck drivers in our region, and as we speak our Nakusp and Area Development board is reaching out to all sectors to participate in strategic priorities.”

Ron Volansky, co-owner of R&A Logging Ltd., admits that he is looking at gravel pits and gravel transport as a way to retain his workforce of 30 people should circumstances get worse. “Although old growth only comprises about 20 percent of our activities, you can’t help but wonder what the government will focus on next in the seemingly endless objective of preserving land,” he says. “I love this business, but if stumpage goes through the roof and prices go down far enough, I would have to close my operation.”

NACFOR is exploring value-added opportunities and working to strengthen the capacity of small forest tenure holders—something that has benefited other community forests. “I think innovative harvesting techniques and smaller scale operations are well within our grasp,” says NACFOR General Manager Hugh Watt. “For example, with different equipment and training it would be economically viable to thin

younger stands while at the same time making them more resilient to wildfire.

“There is also the possibility we could take a percentage of our wood to micro sawmills, to add more value to our logs by making specialty products and returning the gains directly to our community. Additionally, partnerships with First Nations are a distinct possibility in the future. So, we’re studying and assessing a lot of options.”

For a town that thrived after the big flood of the valley in ‘67, these strategies are merely a reflection of Nakusp’s determination not to succumb to calamity. “We agree with some of the NDP’s philosophy, mostly of emphasizing high value over high volume, and their open and honest communication with us makes a positive outcome of our current challenges all the more likely,” Zeleznik says.

“As someone who has lived and breathed forestry, and with one of our four children working in the industry, I’m motivated to make that outcome happen.”▲