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Executive Summary

The silviculture sector is at a crossroads...again. For those who have worked in or followed the industry for any period of time, this isn't an entirely new experience. Various challenges to the health and viability of the sector have emerged over the past few decades. And each time new threats emerged; the creativity, resourcefulness and stubbornness of the industry carried the day. In many ways, the characteristics that describe the resilience of the industry also define the ideal silviculture worker.

Is it any different this time? Anecdotally, the silviculture sector has been facing downwards pressures on contract prices for the past several years. In a climate of declining revenue and increasing costs, silviculture contractors struggle to remain profitable and hopefully offer wages that can compete with other resource sector employers. Reduced earnings potential eventually leads to experienced workers leaving for other career paths. With increased employee turnover, productivity suffers, which leads to even lower margins for already stressed contractors. Recruiting and training new employees to replace veteran piece-rate workers who exit the industry prematurely adds more costs to a sector already under siege. And so the cycle continues...

One of the main goals of the BC Silviculture Workforce Initiative ("BCWSI") project was to find out to what extent the anecdotes reflected reality. Surveys of contractors and workers were conducted over two seasons to see what the data said. One might suggest that since the surveys were conducted with the same people who tell the stories (silviculture workers, supervisors, and employers), the findings would likely be the same. True, but for the first time survey data provided quantitative evidence around the size of the silviculture workforce, the types and scope of work being done, and the changing demographics of the workers. Further survey questions explored qualitative issues of job and pay satisfaction, preferred human resource and management

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approaches, and possible factors that might increase the “stickiness” of the job for existing workers as well as new entrants.

The survey data provided strong evidence to support the anecdotes. There is a seismic shift occurring in the makeup and culture of the “tribe,” a word that has repeatedly emerged as one way many silviculture workers self-identify. The final summary of the project survey results describes the shift, highlights the challenges, and also provides some direction as to possible solutions.

Broadly speaking, the silviculture sector has traditionally been comprised of three main activities: tree planting, tree spacing/stand tending, and wildland firefighting. Other more minor activities such as cone-picking, prescribed burning, and silviculture surveys support the main categories. However, the relative importance and economic impact of these three forestry-related silvicultural endeavors has not been empirically defined. Less well understood is the scope and importance of more recent sectoral activities such as fuels management, beetle probing and control, and ecosystem restoration.

The research indicates that the overall size of the silviculture sector workforce is somewhere around 7,500 workers. About 2/3rds are engaged primarily in treeplanting and the rest, with some overlap, work in brushing & spacing, vegetation management, wildland firefighting, ecosystem restoration, and various support positions. The size of the workforce has remained remarkably consistent over the past several years and is projected to stay the same or even slightly decline in the next five years.

The primary drivers of seasonal labour demand for tree planting services are forest licensee tree planting requirements, provincial forest fire levels, and available investments for intensive silviculture services. Although projected reductions in provincial harvest levels could lead to less future demand for silviculture services, there is still a significant need to help restore ecosystems damaged by the mountain pine beetle and forest fires. With additional social pressure driving political will, it is entirely possible that additional government and industry investments might be made to restore and enhance our provincial

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forests. When that happens, the silviculture sector will need to be ready to meet the demand.

Other survey findings indicated that the workforce is indeed changing. More women are getting involved, currently comprising 42% of the silviculture workforce. First Nations workers make up 4% of the workforce, coming close to the overall percentage of the provincial population. Almost 1/2 of the survey respondents are pursuing some form of education. An already young workforce (over 85% under the age of 30) appears to be getting younger as the average age of a silviculture worker dropped from 27 to 26 between 2013 and 2014. At the same time, the average years of worker experience dropped from 6 to 5, confirming a higher rate of turnover and more new entrants. But the potentially most alarming trend was the number of experienced supervisors and project managers that appear to be leaving the industry, right at a time when their experience and leadership are in the greatest demand.

Understanding what the workforce looks like and where it seems to be going helped the drive the development of a Human Resources (“HR”) strategy with several key areas of focus: recruitment, training, promoting preferred HR & management practices, supervisor skills development, and education on worker rights and responsibilities. The HR strategy was also supported with practical tools addressing the priority focus areas including new worker training materials and video orientation modules, HR handbook for employers, career mapping tools, worker-oriented website, and a mobile application to assist piece-rate workers track their earnings while learning their employment rights.

With the support of the Labour Market Partnerships (“LMP”) program of the Canada – BC Labour Market Development Agreement, the work of the BCWSI has made an impressive and timely contribution towards setting the stage for the future. Silviculture sector employers are already utilizing the written and video training materials developed through the project. Piece rate workers will benefit from the mobile app. Recruitment and information sharing can be further enhanced across the sector with better communication platforms. And the HR strategy report suggests many more potential opportunities and

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initiatives for the sector to continue expanding its focus on recruiting and training the tree planters, fire fighters, brushers & spacers, and ecosystem restoration workers of the future.

Given the right tools and resources to work with, there is no doubt that the resiliency of silviculture sector employers and the energy of the “tribe” can overcome the current challenges. It is our belief that the sector will continue providing essential silvicultural services to British Columbia’s forest industry and, by extension, to all the people of the province who enjoy the benefits of both a healthy economy and a healthy and beautiful natural environment.

Submitted by Steven Mueller (Chair) on behalf of the BCSWI committee:

Chris Akehurst, Sean Ardis, Keith Atkinson, John Betts, Suzanne Christensen (past chair), Jonathan “Scooter” Clark, Sylvia Fenwick-Wilson, Natalia Huatala, John Lawrence, Jake Roos, Crawford Young, Carly Zenzen

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Program Objectives

The BC Silviculture Workforce Initiative project was initiated to identify and develop a human resource strategy for recruiting and retaining reliable and capable workers for the silviculture sector, both now and in the future.

The capacity of contractors to provide both traditional and emergent silvicultural services has been built on what has been, until more recently, a reliable and experienced seasonal workforce. Higher rates of employee turnover, especially veteran supervisors as well as workers with several years of experience who would replace them, combined with lower numbers of applicants for available positions, dictates the development of better approaches and tools for recruiting, training, and retaining suitable employees.

The abilities of the sector to accurately forecast and plan for its future human resource needs has been hindered by the lack of empirical data detailing the makeup of the silviculture workforce. Leaders in the sector have increasingly understood that a successful human resource strategy must be informed and directed by the collection and interpretation of reliable labour force data. This need for information has driven the BCSWI project from the outset.

A number of approaches to achieve the overall project purpose were considered and implemented. The core project objectives could be outlined in three main areas, with sub-objectives supporting the broader categories.

1. Establish Reliable and Empirical Human Resources Data

Establish sampling methodologies and methods

Develop a baseline of statistics to benchmark future trends and developments

Maintain both leading and lagging indicators of workforce vitality

Conduct annual surveys of silviculture workers and communicate to industry

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Release two studies reporting trends in silviculture workforce demographics

Survey employers to assess human resource behaviors and concerns

2. Develop Human Resource Management Resources

Provide resources for employer education in human resource best practices

Establish a stakeholder working group to guide the human resource strategy

Review available studies and information on seasonal workforce matters

Create a human resource strategic plan to guide HR management practices

3. Develop Educational Resources for Forest Restoration Workers and Silviculture Employers

Develop basic Forest Restoration Worker orientation information

Develop basic training and education materials for seasonal silviculture workers

Provide tools to educate employers and workers in human resource practices

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Program Implementation & Accomplishments

1. Over the short lifespan of this LMP project, the efforts of the BCSWI have resulted in achieving most of the objectives identified in the original project proposal. The information will be invaluable in informing future human resource efforts both at the individual employer and sectoral levels.
2. The true test of project outcomes will occur over time as the various resources and strategies are employed to improve workforce recruitment and retention.

1. Reliable and Empirical Human Resources Data

An authoritative count of the number of BC silviculture sector employers and employees was unavailable prior to this project. Previously the number of employers working in the BC silviculture sector was estimated to be as high as 400 with estimates for silviculture workers ranging as high as 10,000.

Other questions have been asked perennially: specifically, who is the workforce; what are the demographics; and what are the factors that attract and retain workers in a largely seasonal industry?

The answers to these and other questions would outline the nature of the human resource challenge and might help identify where innovative and effective solutions might be found.

Throughout the 2013 and 2014 seasons, the BCSWI strengthened its labour market information collection efforts by initiating a Labor Market Information (LMI) research project. The goal of the research project was to answer the following 13 questions posed by the BCSWI committee:

1. What is the current size of the workforce for BC's silviculture subsectors; tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing?

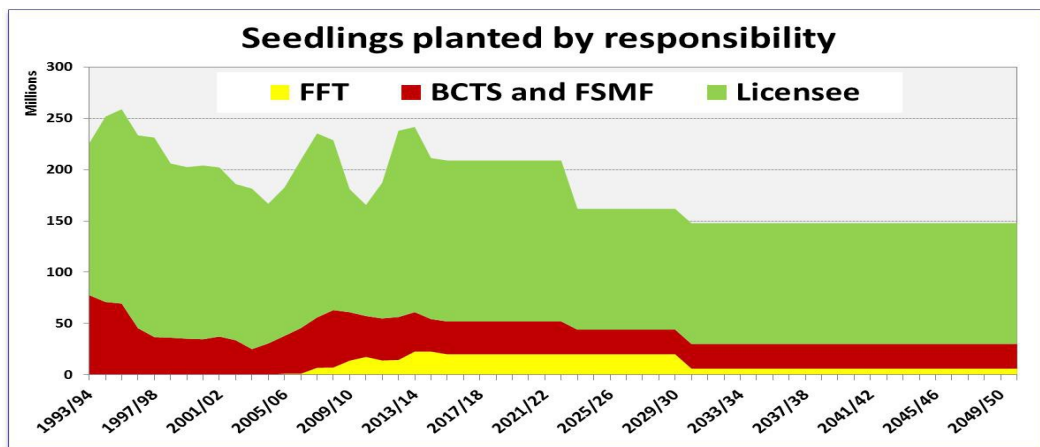
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2. What has been the historical workforce for the last 5 years for tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing?
3. What are the drivers of workforce demand for tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing?
4. What is the anticipated required workforce for the next 10 years for tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing?
5. What is the anticipated growth rate for the next 10 years for tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing?
6. What is the workforce outlook (gap between supply and demand) for the next 10 years for tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing?
7. What is the qualitative description of the workforce for tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing?
8. What are the factors attracting workers to tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing and spacing employment?
9. What are the factors retaining workers for tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing?
10. Can training play a positive role in better recruitment and retention for tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing workers?
11. What are the current, active successful retention strategies in BC's silviculture sector?
12. What are the factors that can increase long term retention to BC's silviculture sector?
13. What are the factors that can increase an employer's recruitment success for tree planting, wildfire fighting and brushing & spacing workers?

The answers to some of these questions were very revealing. It is worth outlining a few key results at this point (complete survey results are available in the 2014 BC Silviculture Labour Market Initiative report at www.wsca.ca).

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Research into projected sowing plans indicates that demand for tree planting services is slated to decline somewhat over the next several years.



This estimate of reduced future demand leads to projections for somewhat smaller numbers of workers to plant and care for the trees.

However, it may be possible to postulate that the declining and flat lined future projections for workforce demand are based on a certain amount of forward uncertainty. Without knowing all the factors that could drive demand in the future, the estimates seem to rely entirely on anticipated levels of the Annual Allowable Cut (“AAC”) in the province, and thus reflect a status quo approach.

What the data doesn’t, or can’t, predict are workforce demand factors like increased numbers and sizes of wildland and interface fires sparked by climate change which could drive demand for preventative fuel abatement workers as well as contract fire fighters. Public sentiment could also drive social demand for more ecosystem restoration work across a landscape already blighted by the mountain pine beetle and threatened by other forest health issues. There may be increased demand for intensive silviculture activities to help shorten the rotation cycle for existing forest plantations. And emerging factors like bioenergy, carbon offset programs, and forest product

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innovation could create and drive forestry and silviculture workforce opportunities not even currently contemplated.

What new workforce categories may soon be added to the traditional categories in the table below? Ecosystem restoration worker, or...?

	Tree Planting	Brushing & Spacing	Wildfire Fighting	Other	Total Workers
2014/15	4,387	1,415	1,427	151	7,380
2015/16	3,609	1,415	1,427	151	6,602
2016/17	3,609	1,415	1,427	151	6,602
2017/18	3,609	1,415	1,427	151	6,602
2018/19	3,609	1,415	1,427	151	6,602

Given that the future demand for workers roughly approximates the number of existing workers, the need for new workers will consist mostly of turnover or replacement of existing positions. The survey data suggests an annual workforce turnover of up to 1,500 employees, a number that could increase if current trends continue. Of course, this turnover is more problematic when it is senior employees that are leaving and whose positions need to be filled.

Other survey results fill in some of the blanks that the anecdotal accounts would also suggest: on their worst days and worst pay periods a majority of piece-rate workers and their supervisors reported earning less than minimum wage. This would imply that the employer was required to “top-up” their wages to at least achieve minimum wage. If “worst” periods become too much the norm, a huge disincentive exists for employee recruitment and retention.

When it comes to other qualitative assessments, the data is just as instructive. Worker satisfaction with their employer’s “professionalism” remained consistent between 2013 and 2014, with slightly higher overall satisfaction in 2013. In 2014, two thirds (76%) of workers were satisfied, 15% were neutral, but 8% were not satisfied which was a 100% increase from 4% in 2013.

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Workers were most satisfied with their employer's concern for the safety of employees, efforts to maintain a respectful workplace free from harassment, their tolerance for individuality, and meal options at camp.

Workers were least satisfied with their employer's organization and logistics, and fairness in assignments, task, or work location. There were varied responses regarding the quality of management/supervisor support with 15 % of workers being somewhat dissatisfied or not satisfied at all and 50% of the workers being very satisfied.

In spite of overall worker satisfaction with employer efforts to maintain a respectful workplace, almost half (49%) of workers report that they have experienced or witnessed verbal aggression or name calling within the workplace. One in four workers witness aggressive/threatening gestures or the spreading of malicious rumours, and one in five report they have experienced or witnessed personal attacks.

These qualitative results as well as others found in the full survey report might help employers and the sector increase the attractiveness of the job and work environment for new and returning workers in the future

2. Develop A Human Resource Strategy

With the direction of the BCSWI Steering Committee, an HR strategy was developed around ten priorities with fourteen potential solutions to support the recruitment, retention and talent management of forest restoration workers. The full report on the Human Resource Strategy can be found at www.wsca.ca.

HR Priority #1: Promoting Silviculture Employment Standards

1. Communication and Distribution of Video to Educate Employees about ESA rules
2. Educating Supervisors and Employers about ESA Rules

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HR Priority #2: Elevating the Sector's Brand Awareness

3. Developing Silviculture Worker Profiles

HR Priority #3: Preparing New and Returning Workers

4. Preparation of New and Returning Workers – Pre-season Orientation
5. Offer ATV and Resource Road Training to New and Returning Workers

HR Priority #4: Addressing Harassment in the Workplace

6. Develop an Audit, Policy, Procedures and Investigation Process for Harassment
7. Employee Harassment Training and Prevention

HR Priority #5: Increase Work Opportunities for Seasonal Workers - Consistent Work

8. Work Opportunities that Could Extend the Season

HR Priority #6: Developing Supervisors

9. Supervisor Development Training

HR Priority #7: Engaging First Nations

10. Develop Information for Employers about First Nation Partnership and Engagement
11. Participation as Exhibitor at the Aboriginal Business Match (ABM) WEST 2015 Conference May 11-13, 2015

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HR Priority #8: Outlining Career Options - Career Mapping

12. Career Map for Silviculture Roles
13. Career Map for Forest Restoration Worker

HR Priority #9: Preparing Rookies

HR Priority #10: Harnessing Technology to Improve Productivity

14. Develop and promote Training and Nutrition Reference App for Rookie Tree Planters

A number of the suggested HR priorities were addressed and implemented to some degree during the life of the project. Most of the tools and resources will have a lifespan long past the project term. These industry assets include training handbooks, video orientation modules, website portals, and a mobile app which are outlined further in the Implementation section of this report.

The HR Strategy development was guided by current HR workforce trends and how these trends might impact the silviculture sector. These trends include:

- ≡ the millennial generation and their values
- ≡ women as an increasing source of labour supply
- ≡ engagement with First Nations
- ≡ the war for talent among the sectors
- ≡ brand awareness
- ≡ technological advances
- ≡ evolving compensation tools
- ≡ focus on hiring the right “Job Fit” to reduce the costs and consequences of bad hires

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- ≡ employer driven workforce development
- ≡ the importance of communications, and
- ≡ the changing legal landscape.

Potential funding sources were also identified as a means of supporting the implementation of the HR Strategy and specific solutions. A strong recommendation was made to appoint a steward for the HR strategy who would then have the role of communicating the Human Resources Strategy to key stakeholders, establishing consistent, sector-wide communications to workers and employers, and coordinating activities with other forestry workforce initiatives.

The future is unknown and rapidly changing. It will be important to measure the success of the solutions that are undertaken, while continuing to watch for emerging trends and issues that could require changes to the areas of focus. Following the HR Strategy means developing tool and processes that best meets the needs, desires and aspirations of the employees who make each company successful. A company without employees is not a company.

The silviculture sector knows good employees are their biggest asset and is committed to improving practices that help recruit, retain and manage talent.

3. Develop Training Resources for Forest Restoration Workers

One of the first projects undertaken and completed was the production of a Forest Worker Training Workbook. The focus was on tree planting; the activity involving the greatest number of workers in the silviculture sector. The workbook is primarily intended for contractor crew leaders to use when training their new planters. It may also prove beneficial as an online reference for planters and others wishing to deliver current planting training material.

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The impetus was recognizing that planters need to be adequately trained in order to be safe and effective long-term workers. The workbook's intent is to offer standardized and comprehensive training materials to better prepare new planters in an effort to reduce injury and improve worker retention.

The training modules reflect minimum learning outcomes, in an effort to ensure that each trainee is given the knowledge and skills needed to plant safely and effectively. The training is also intended to encourage responsible and respectful attitudes, allowing for the appropriate use of the learned skills and knowledge and the fostering of a healthy, safe and positive work environment. Subsequent employer evaluation should focus on the verification of the trainee's knowledge, skills and attitude.

The workbook incorporates existing reference material, identifies best management practices, and gives guidance on teaching strategies. It was developed with the participation of experienced planters, supervisors, and planting company owners.

The workbook was widely distributed to contractors at the annual 2015 WSCA silviculture conference and is available for download at www.wsca.ca.

The workbook material was also used as source material for a number of video orientation modules that were developed as a complementary resource for employers to use when orienting and training their new employees. All the videos are publically available on YouTube and can be found there by searching for the BC Bushwhacker channel. Interested or newly hired silviculture workers can view the videos to educate themselves on what the job will entail and how they can be best prepared. Contractors can link to the online resources or purchase a USB drive loaded with high quality versions of the modules that does not require an internet connection to play (good idea if new employee orientation is happening in a bush camp).

A mobile application for smartphones or tablets was also produced to help workers keep track of their piece rate earnings while also learning about their

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rights under various BC Employment Standards legislation. The app will be available for Android and Apple devices on their respective stores.

Links to these and other resources such as the forest restoration worker career map will be available through the Western Silvicultural Contractors' Association website, www.wsca.ca, as well as the www.bcbushwhacker.com website.

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Lessons Learned

Overall, the project confirmed that there was definitely a need for a group of industry stakeholders to come together and identify gaps and common felt needs in how the silviculture workforce is stewarded.

There was also a need to have the collective expertise and experience of the steering committee validated, or challenged, by concrete survey data that could be relied on with a high degree of confidence.

In most cases, the survey findings were not a surprise, at least regarding the general demographics of the workforce. It was still instructive to learn that 1/2 of all tree planters have less than two years of experience.

More surprising was the qualitative data. For example, most of the committee members were shocked to find that close to half of surveyed workers had witnessed or experienced some degree of workplace harassment or bullying. Depending on the severity of the harassment, this could be exposing employers to significant risk under current WorkSafeBC legislation.

It was also interesting to understand what makes the job attractive to workers. The majority picked earnings (99%) and independence/outdoor experience (95%) as the top reasons to choose to work in the silviculture sector (career choice was last on the list). However, when asked what keeps them working in the sector over time, workers ranked pay as number six on the list after fair assignment of tasks or duties, fair treatment of employees, management support, good organization & logistics, and safety on the work site.

On a related theme, when asked what retention strategy would be most effective; employers indicated off-season communication, subsidized standard training courses, and advancement opportunities within company. In contrast, the employee interview responses focused on a well-managed business, a fair, respectful and safe work environment, good camps and equipment, specific on-the-job training in productivity, and, finally, fair pay.

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So, workers may come for the money and the outdoors, but they stay for a much more complex and rewarding set of criteria.

Another lesson learned was that after two consecutive years, interview fatigue has set in. It's time to take a break

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Publicity

3. Social Media

A conscious choice was made to focus project communication around various social media channels linked back to a central website – www.bcbushwhacker.com. The social media channels included bcbushwhacker-branded Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter accounts.

This was somewhat effective when there were resources to maintain a constant flow of relevant and interesting information, but will be more challenging now that the project has concluded.

4. WSCA Annual Conference

Each year of the project, the project status was reported out to the attendees at the Western Silvicultural Contractors' Association annual gathering. The presentation was followed by lively question periods and debate.

5. Internet

The www.wsca.ca website is another venue for publicizing the work of the project as well as the resources developed during the project. Over time, other popular silviculture websites such as www.replant.ca, www.tree-planter.com, and www.silviculturemagazine.ca will also host information on the project along with supporting resources.

6. Other Media

Much of the work of the project was intended for a fairly narrowly defined audience, the silviculture contracting community and the workers they employ. As such, traditional media such as print, television or radio was not part of the communication strategy for the project.

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Financial Report

7. Project Budget Overview

The project budget was carefully managed to focus on development and delivery of the initiatives, resources, and tools identified as priorities by the steering committee.

Overall, the project ended with a surplus of almost \$60,000. A significant part of the surplus is based on unanticipated recovery of GST/HST included in the initial budget. Other areas of savings were in committee and chair expenses which allowed more resources to be directed at project delivery.

Description	Budget	Actual	Surplus
Committee Expenses	\$50,000	\$43,071	\$6,929
Chairperson/Project Manager	75,000	66,118	8,882
Project Scope Analysis Report	20,000	16,076	3,924
LMI Survey Research	85,000	96,066	-11,066
Training Development	60,000	62,976	-2,976
Communications Strategy	50,000	57,796	-7,796
HR Strategy & Toolkit	65,000	63,200	1,800
Recruitment & Retention Tools	25,000	23,063	1,937
Administration/Office Expenses	57,000	57,000	0
Other Expenses	69,640	11,388	58,252
TOTAL PROJECT EXPENSES	\$556,640	\$496,754	\$59,889

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Next Steps

The WSCA will continue to steward the project resources and monitor uptake by the industry. The Labour Market Initiative survey report pointed to some possible future approaches to assist in data collection on industry demographics and trends. There also are a number of potential projects identified in the HR strategy report that could continue to build on what has been accomplished to date. Further silviculture sector consultation to identify priorities would need to be conducted at that time. There would also need to be new project funding partners engaged to support the development of new sector resources. Collaboration with other forest industry stakeholders on projects of similar intent and focus is a very real possibility that could create additional synergies.

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Committee Member	Organization	Role
Akehurst, Chris	Akehurst and Galvani Reforestation	Contractor/Employer
Ardis, Sean	Industry Trainer	Supervisor
Atkinson, Keith	BC First Nations Forestry Council	Executive Director
Betts, John	Western Silvicultural Contractors' Association	Executive Director
Christensen, Suzanne		Past Chair
Clark, Jonathan "Scooter"	Replant.ca	Supervisor/Blogger
Fenwick-Wilson, Sylvia	Industry Trainer	Supervisor
Huatala, Natalia		Silviculture Worker
Lawrence, John	Brinkman Group of Companies	Contractor/Employer
Mueller, Steven	Stonewynd Management Strategies	Chair
Roos, Jake	Loki Tree Service	Contractor/Employer
Young, Crawford	Spectrum Resource Group	Contractor/Employer
Zenzen, Carly	Spectrum Resource Group	Worker/HR Staff

Consultants	Organization	Role
Bax, Krista	Krista Bax	LMI Survey/HR
Balson, Doug	Dialogue Research	LMI Survey
Clark, Jonathan	Thirteen Towers Inc.	Training Videos
Gibbs, Robb	Twisted Lime Media Inc.	Mobile App
Gilmour, Julia	Julia Gilmour	Web site
King, Nate	Twisted Lime Media Inc.	Mobile App
McIntyre, Susan	People In Focus Consulting	HR Strategy
Maika, Frances	Vox Communications	Communications
Mueller, Steven	Stonewynd Management Strategies	Research
Wallis, John	Wallis Environmental Consultants	Training Toolkit
Weicker, Ted	Ference Weicker & Company	LMI Survey
Willimovsky, Claudia	Claudia Willimovsky	Project

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Advisors	Organization	Role
Murphy, Niamh	BC Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training - Sector & Project Based Programs	Program Manager
Westran, Joan		Program Manager