

## **2019: The Year in Review among Workers and Contractors**

A report from the BC Forestry Safety Advocate Jordan Tesluk

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Last year, silviculture contractors around BC gathered in Kamloops to discuss the challenge of recruiting and retaining sufficient tree planting workers to manage the rising volume of seedlings to be planted in BC. The contractors met again on September 25<sup>th</sup> of this year to review their performance in 2019, and their prospects for maintaining their workforce for 2020 and beyond. The combined effects of ongoing harvesting, several extreme fire seasons, and government reforestation programs such as the Forest Carbon Initiative has pushed the overall volume of trees to be planted in BC to historic highs (over 300 million trees) that are expected to endure for several more seasons. Over the past 20 years tree planting wages had remained stagnant and had effectively declined when analyzed according to inflation rates, while minimum wage and inflation-adjusted hourly earnings for average workers in BC had risen substantially. In an effort to establish a course correction to this trend and ensure their ability to secure adequate numbers of workers, contractors took steps to increase wages paid to planters and implement changes to improve treatment and training of workers. During the 2019 season, workers and employers provided feedback on their experiences that has been summarized in this article.

Estimates from workers and contractors indicated that wages paid to planters have risen by 10 to 15 percent across the province. There was significant variance in the distribution of these increases, with some workers seeing greater increases than others as the market for labour and prices-paid-to-the-planter recovered and sought a new market norm. Efforts to increase production also included development of more formally structured training programs, use of new physiotherapy systems for injury prevention and treatment, reductions or eliminations of camp and accommodation costs by some contractors, and stronger efforts to eliminate bullying and harassment at work. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these efforts have had a positive impact on workers, with 85% of workers (n=90) reporting being satisfied with their earnings, and 80% of workers (n=102) indicating they are likely to return next year.

While these responses reflect more positivity than past surveys, they are also tempered by workers expressing increased willingness to seek work with other contractors or on contracts for other licensees if conditions do not meet their expectations. Workers have also identified continuing grievances with certain practices such as “unpaid labor” such as emptying tree delivery trucks or setting up camps. There are also indications that many employers struggle to find adequate time and resources to train workers in critical aspects of their job and living in the woods that have a direct impact on their productivity. Areas for improvement include ergonomics, proper gear selection, and healthy eating and sleeping habits. Other employers have also noted that strong training programs cannot compensate for faulty recruitment strategies, and that more thought is required to how new workers are located and contacted.

The general success in meeting 2019 volume demands was buoyed by the return of both contractors and workers that had chosen to not participate in the industry until market conditions had improved, an apparent increase in the recruitment of planters from the Ontario industry, growth of smaller companies to handle increased volume, and contractors assisting each other in finishing jobs with subcontracting between companies that had not previously cooperated in such a manner. While the ability to satisfy volume demands BC received an unexpected boost of production from several large crews sent back to BC during the large fires in Alberta. In future years, Alberta may instead act as a

greater draw for planting labour as reforestation efforts are focused on plantations burned in 2019. Meanwhile, weather conditions and a lack of large fires or significant flood conditions allowed BC planting to unfold over more favorable conditions than had been seen in 2017 and 2018. Significant advancements in managing and preventing repetitive strain injuries also helped keep workers off claims and in the field. In summary, the success of 2019 may be considered to be a product of not only hard work and careful planning, but also good fortune.

The happy story of planting in the interior has not been mirrored on the coast, where workers have reported making approximately 25% less than they had in the interior in terms of daily wages. Such reports are concerning in light of the fact that coastal planters represent the most experienced and skilled segment of the planting workforce, and one that provides a critical reservoir of talent and production to the interior. Many workers progress from planting on the coast in March and April to managing contractors or crews later in the interior in May through July. Continued degradation of coastal planting conditions poses challenges to the industry's ability to retain the participation of these critical staff, as other industries and careers are providing increased attraction. Moreover, immediate problems are occurring for coastal contractors, as workers are seeking to leave their coastal jobs early to find more lucrative interior jobs before the coastal jobs are complete, and several coastal companies struggled to finish their trees on time.

Another continuing challenge for all contractors is holding on to key staff, including supervisors, crew leaders, and cooking staff. Although seldom identified as key players in recruitment discussions, talented cooks play a key role in maintaining happy crews and food quality is often cited by workers as an important consideration in selecting who they choose to work for. Employers recognizing the needs of cooking staff have been taking steps to address pay demands, ensure that the cooks have a full day off (without shopping), and ensure they are treated respectfully by workers and other staff. Crew leaders and supervisors on commission have shared in the profits of the workers, but those on salary have required pay increases to keep pace with the evolving labor market. In some cases, entire crews led by a popular crew leader have moved from one company to another in search of better opportunities.

Meeting capacity demands in 2020 and beyond has received a boost of confidence with the outcomes observed in 2019. However, there are still recruitment and retention challenges to consider in addition to those already identified. The overall image of the industry continues to suffer from negative characterizations that occasionally arise in opinion articles, and the enduring black eye from isolated cases of worker abuse in the past. The industry currently lacks a cohesive social media strategy for connecting with its largely young and transient worker population, or any manner of organized communication with the workforce outside the efforts of individual employers. There are opportunities for the industry to work as a whole in addressing some of these issues, and one step in the right direction includes developing plans for an industry film festival to recognize and celebrate the work that planters perform. Some employers are exploring other steps such as supporting benefits plans for key staff, conducting seasonal exit surveys to gauge worker opinions and needs, and of course negotiating for better prices so they can ensure they have sufficient funds to satisfy the rising cost of labour.

Tree planters have received the first significant course correction in their wages in the past 20 years, while average wage earners throughout BC have actually seen their earnings rise above the inflation rate over the same period. This shift is occurring against the backdrop of a forest industry that is facing a significant downturn, with continuing demands from managers to cut costs. However, the importance of tree planting has never been greater or more highly valued. The long-awaited rise in prices-paid-to-planters is not only a well-deserved testament to the important and long undervalued services tree

planters provide, but also a critical step in ensuring the industry has access to the labor that will help rebuild the forests, and ensure future industry has access to timber and fiber.