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Recent Workforce Trends and their Effects on the Silviculture Program in British Columbia

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British Columbia's entrepreneurial silviculture sector provides a reliable just-in-time service delivery of forestry activities from planting trees to fighting wildfires. Transient, and seeming to rely often on improvisation, contractors actually run logistically sophisticated businesses that are able to match varying field conditions to the biological and administrative imperatives of their forest company and government clients. The sector has adapted well to keeping up with the next surprise.

The industry is labour intensive and relies on an elite workforce willing to consistently work hard under often remote and challenging circumstances. Just what attracts manual workers to the sector and keeps them there has been studied in 2 recent reports undertaken by the Western Silvicultural Contractors' Association's (WSCA) BC SAFE Silviculture Project, which is under the aegis of the BC Forest Safety Council. The results show a significant demographic shift to younger and less experienced workers. This has implications for the productivity of the sector, its safety performance, and the cultural underpinnings that have kept it successfully planting almost 6 billion trees to date.

Other work by the WSCA has tracked economic trends that appear to have contributed to

the draining of experience from the sector. Principally, planters earnings over the last decade have not matched trends in the consumer price index. The SAFE silviculture sector studies show workers are attracted to the sector and will remain with the contractors based on earnings and the safety and organizational competence of their employers. The shortness of the tree planting season, and the unreliability of other forestry activity opportunities, have led prospective workers to look elsewhere for employment. In 2006, almost a third of those workers interviewed said they would not return in 2007. Anecdotal reports from this year suggest the ranks of tree planters continue to fill with younger, less experienced workers.

In the short term, the applications from inexperienced workers are low, but seem to sufficient to fill the ranks of the exiting workers. As for the long term, the sector appears faced with the conundrum of having to do more forestry work, including stand tending and ecosystem restoration, with a smaller workforce.