

Harmonizing First Nations' Interests in the FIA-Forest Science Program

The Forest Investment Account – Forest Science Program (FIA-FSP) funds research and the extension of forest science results to meet the information needs and priorities of those who plan and manage British Columbia's public forests and rangelands. Since 2004, the FIA-FSP has invested over \$50 million in research and extension activities supporting sustainable forest management.

Early in 2006, the Forest Science Board initiated a process to include First Nations interests within the FIA-FSP so that First Nations peoples, interests and values would be better reflected in the research and extension activities funded through the program.

First Nations' interests in and knowledge of British Columbia forests are substantial, arising from living in and from these lands for millennia. Through rights and title issues, and as workers, business owners and researchers, First Nations are intimately involved in forest resource planning and operations. They bring two different and important perspectives to the FIA-FSP: they are providers of knowledge and experience, which supports sustainable forest management, and users of knowledge generated through FIA-FSP funded research. As Bill Bourgeois, PhD, RPF, chair of the Forest Science Board, explains: "In British Columbia, First Nations have increasingly participated in resource management decisions. For this reason, the board felt it was important to involve First Nations as partners in developing the FIA-FSP."

The board's first step was to establish First Nations representation on the 12-member Forest Science Board. Following recommendations from the BC First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Working Group, in April 2006, the Deputy Minister of Forests and Range appointed Beverly Bird and Pamela Perreault to the Forest Science Board. Ms. Bird is a member of the Tl'azt'en Nation in north central BC, and Ms. Perreault is an Anishinabae from the Garden River First Nation of Ontario, who has been working in BC for the past decade.

Guided by Bird and Perreault, the Forest Science Board is approaching the harmonization of First Nations interests in FIA-FSP with the following principles:

1. First Nations and non-First Nations have parallel interests and processes.
2. First Nations and non-First Nations contribute understanding to the other's interests.
3. Harmonization is possible on issues where the groups have common interests.
4. The harmonization process is respectful and equitable.

In the past 18 months, Bird and Perreault have invested their energies, used their experience as researchers and drawn on their networks in BC's First Nations and scientific communities to advance the harmonization process. One of their key accomplishments was to establish the First Nations Advisory Group (FNAG) and, with its members, to compile an active list of First Nations' interests in research topics under the FIA-FSP mandate. Generating the list involved communicating with many of the province's more than 200 First Nations communities. Perreault, who now chairs this advisory group, explains, "in reality, First Nations have been doing forest

science research for many years but under the guise of treaty, land-use planning, oil and gas development or litigation. The FIA-FSP is giving them the space to directly address their own forest management questions.”

Is harmonization possible? Both Bird and Perreault are optimistic that western scientists and First Nations communities have many research interests in common. As Bird observes, “western scientists and First Nations have been doing their own research for a long time and at some point the two research communities had to engage in collaborative research to build management regimes that reflect First Nations values.”

The biggest challenge to harmonization at the moment is the lack of a comprehensive First Nations forest research strategy to guide the FNAG and First Nations Forest Science Board members on First Nations interests and priorities. In the months ahead, the Forest Science Board hopes to explore ways to address this gap with the BC First Nations Forestry Council.

Although early in the journey, the harmonization process, thus far, has made Perreault a cautious champion. “The extent of harmonization will be dictated by the degree of overlap between First Nation research priorities and FIA-FSP priorities,” says Perreault. Ultimately, Bird and Perreault would like the harmonization process to encourage collaboration between First Nations and non-First Nations in addressing common goals, and to increase the amount of research targeting forest issues that are specific to First Nations.

For more information on the FIA-FSP, including the harmonization process, visit the FIA-FSP website: www.fia-fsp.ca.

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