Review of B.C. data on annual old-growth logging in 2021

Background to the media release "Review of B.C. data shows annual old-growth logging has gone up, not down", September 26, 2023

A Sierra Club BC review of provincial logging data shows that the total old growth area cut in 2021 was 45,700 hectares, not 38,300 hectares, as reported by the province in 2022. The updated annual total is equivalent to logging about 175 soccer fields per day and about 19 percent higher than the total reported by the province last year, when the data was seemingly incomplete.

The 2020 Old-Growth Strategic Review (OGSR) included 14 recommendations to implement a paradigm-shift in forest stewardship in B.C. One of the "conditions required for change" (recommendation 5) called on the B.C. government to "provide the public with timely and objective information about forest conditions and trends" and was supposed to be implemented during the first year of implementation (the three-year framework can be found on page 67 of the OGSR)

Concerned about the ongoing lack of timely old-growth logging data from the B.C. government, Sierra Club BC and mapper David Leversee took a closer look at the provincial data used to compile the annual total area of old growth logged, with a focus on 2021, the last year the provincial government offered an update for.

In November 2022, the province stated in a media release that "Logging of old growth has declined by 42%, from an estimated 65,500 hectares in 2015 to 38,300 hectares in 2021" and shared a limited excerpt of annual old-growth logging data (2015 to 2021). To support the statement that old-growth logging had declined "to record lows", the province compared the old-growth logging total of 2021 to 2015, instead of the previous year (2020).

A closer look at the limited provincial data shared at the time showed a relatively stable old-growth logging rate during the period 2019 to 2021, averaging 150 soccer fields per day. However, based on Sierra Club BC's review, the total area of old growth logged in 2021 was not only 19% higher than previously reported by the province, but it was also significantly higher than in 2020. Instead of falling to a 'record-low', it increased by about a fifth (if the provincial total for 2020 is relatively accurate, which is likely because more time has passed, allowing for more complete data).

Sierra Club BC reviewed the publicly available Consolidated Cutblocks (CCB) data using the August 19, 2022, update (from a few months before the provincial November 2022 press release) and compared it to the 2020 old-growth area as shown in the Vegetation Resources Inventories (VRI) 2020 [1].

The results showed that the total amount of old growth logged in harvest year 2021 was close to the total the province shared last fall (38,300 hectares), which seems to indicate that this was the main source for the provincial statement at the time. Unfortunately, Sierra Club BC believes that the province used incomplete information.

The 2022 CCB data has two data sources for harvest year 2021: the 'Reporting Silviculture Updates and Land Status Tracking System' (RESULTS), specifically the 'Openings' and 'Reserves' databases and Landsat

[1] Forests over 140 years old in the interior and over 250 years old on the coast.

satellite updates. However, a problem with using CCB from August 2022 is that there is a delay in updating the RESULTS database. Blocks logged in one year may not show up in the database until one or two years later. In fact, the methodology document for the 2022 CCB data states that *"...this dataset should not be used to officially determine how much area has been logged every year"*. Using the data that was available in 2022, RESULTS totaled 29,730 hectares and Landsat updates accounted for 9,550 hectares (adding up to 39,280 hectares).

Since a year has passed since the last CCB data were released, Sierra Club BC looked at the current RESULTS[2] databases and found that the RESULTS portion of the 2021 harvest year in old growth has increased to 39,400 ha. About 3,280 hectares of the Landsat-sourced blocks in 2022 have now been replaced with more accurate 2021 RESULTS data[3], leaving 6,270 hectares of updates in the 2021 harvest year. This adds up to a total of 45,670 ha – about 19% more than proclaimed by the province last year.

In summary:

- Sierra Club BC presumes the province used Consolidated Cutblocks and VRI-defined old growth to arrive at the "record low" number for 2021.
- Consolidated Cutblocks (CCB) for the 2021 harvest year has two data sources, Landsat and RESULTS.
- It appears the RESULTS part used in late 2022 was incomplete because it takes longer than one year for all blocks to be entered into the database.
- Using current RESULTS and non-overlapping Landsat, gives us a new total of 45,670 ha of old-growth logging in 2021.

The incomplete, delayed, and superficial provincial data about old-growth trends shows that the B.C. government still has a lot of work to do to fulfill one of the conditional recommendations of the OGSR. Much more detailed and timely information about the state of the forest is necessary to assess progress implementing the promised paradigm-shift.

Future provincial logging updates need to distinguish between changes in logging rates that are related to the exhaustion of forests in B.C. after decades of unsustainable logging—now combined with climate impacts—and reductions in logging that can be tied to actions by the government (like newly protected forests and changes in forest stewardship).

Recent framing by the B.C. government implied that old-growth logging had declined because of charting a new course without offering any evidence for this to be the case. It is time for the province to speed up the work with First Nations and demonstrate change on the ground by clearly highlighting what areas can no longer be logged and changing the annual allowable cut accordingly.

[2] Harvest reserves with Reserve Code "G" were removed from the opening area.

[3] Landsat blocks that overlapped current openings by >50% of their original size.