

The Future of the Forestry Work-force

The forestry work-force in North America, Europe, and other industrialized regions, is in rapid transition, with the workers experiencing changes in their work and personal lives at unprecedented rates. Stable and rewarding forest work (although dangerous) is in upheaval from a variety of technical, economic, and social, forces. Such forces include: mechanization of forest work, emerging environmental stewardship, demands for recreational services, instability in rural communities, preservationist demands to keep people out of the forest, a continuing shift to contractor-based forest work, and the need to sustain and improve the productivity of the work-force.

Why are forest workers so important? Forest workers are applied ecologists and implementers of the policies of foresters and land managers. No matter how lofty the forest management goal is, it must be implemented by workers actually doing something. The notion that supervisors and technicians can direct and control workers' actions is in sharp contrast to the potentials of a well-trained work-force cooperatively executing forest operations. The blending of society's need for products from the forest along with environmental objectives is ultimately reduced to a worker using a chainsaw or crosscut. The results can be appropriate and effective or, alternatively, damaging.

The rural roots of industrialized societies remain in the forest-dependent communities. Forest workers whose lives have been spent protecting the forest, extracting useful products, and working in the forest, are now liable to be cast as the destructive agents of the forest. Yet forest workers *are and will continue to be* the stewards of useful forests for humanity, even though their work will change to meet new society demands. But what structures and institutions will be helpful and supportive of those changes? Individual countries must address issues of forest workers within their own organizational and institutional structures. However, the identification of common problems and issues can lead to more resources being directed at solutions.

In some industrialized countries, replacement and recruitment of forest workers is inadequate to meet the management needs of the forest. In other countries, forest workers face such dangerous work that injuries (and even death) reduce the working careers to mid-life. The trend to contractor-based forest work has shifted responsibilities that would be supportable in larger organizations, to small firms (5–10 people) which can barely survive as businesses. While machines offer safety and labour savings, they are not without injury problems. In some circumstances, owner–operators must overwork themselves to support, not their families, but the expensive equipment!

Hope lies in the shared experiences of these industrialized countries and their collective creativity. Where various institutions have addressed problems, improvements have been possible and even impressive. Safety has improved through training, personal protective equipment, and management/worker commitment. Recruitment based on a better-than-formerly perception of forest work has been successful. Contractor organizations have been able to support improvements that were not possible by single firms alone. Urban communities can be shown the value and importance of forest stewardship in rural communities, while a shared vision of improvements can lead to concrete actions and programmes.

The equitable sharing of issues and opportunities for the forestry work-force was considered very recently at a special international seminar in which a wide range of interested international organizations and individuals participated, an outcome of which is anticipated to be the establishment of an international network to deal with this important topic.*

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* See the **Important Prospect** by the same Author on pages 87–8 of our Spring issue (*Environmental Conservation*, 19(1), 1992). — Ed.