

Woodmere Field Trip

May 24, 2023

I asked the Ministry to go on a field trip to the Wildfire Risk Reduction (WRR) Treatment Block near on Woodmere Road because it overlapped with a Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) Old Growth Area. I wanted to determine whether treatment would affect the Old Growth designation. Also, I was asked by the Ministry if I 'felt' like the stand was Old Growth after treatment, based on my experience in the Bulkley Valley? The BV Community Resource Board would also like to know what the impact of the WRR treatment was on the Old Growth Status.

The size and height of old trees partially 'felt' like Old Growth. Missing were significant younger trees of various ages, a closed canopy of old trees, and some wind fall. The soft feeling of downed moss-covered trees and forest floor was not present. Hardly any lichen hung from the branches. The old growth feeling was only partially present as I walked through the stand of trees.

The area had been called old growth TAP because of the 'Tall Trees'. The remaining trees, mostly Subalpine Fir (Balsam), were left after logging. The trees weren't particularly tall or large but appeared to meet minimum Old Growth height and size requirements. There were fresh cut stumps of even larger trees. Almost all the Pine and most of the Spruce have been removed during logging. The site plan called for more Spruce and Pine to be retained. (Note: This is estimate of species composition and it needs to be verified by a Silviculture Survey.) The logging operator did a good job retaining the tall Balsam and some Spruce. The tall trees are an important part of the Old Growth 'feeling' but by no means the whole story.

The site prescription called for the removal of 52 % of the large living trees. The BC Wildfire Service said: "Where possible the licensee will perform ground fuels cleanup (rake/pile/burn) to a level deemed appropriate". "The target fuel level is <15 tons/ha". As I interpret this, it means the removal of almost all small trees, standing dead trees, logs lying on the ground, shrubs, and all other combustible material on the forest floor, to reduce the wildfire risk. (Note: A survey should be done to verify my estimate). All the above so called 'fuels' are important characteristics that are required to maintain the integrity of Old Growth. The site prescription was not silviculture prescription, so no planting or regeneration was prescribed.

Therefore, what was Old Growth, no longer meets Old Growth characteristics including biodiversity, stand structure, carbon sequestration, carbon capture, ecosystem interconnectivity and resiliency to fire.

The future of this stand is unknown. Whether it would still be classified as old growth by TAP because of the remaining tall trees is questionable. The inventory height class will probably not change. The species composition will change from leading Pine and Spruce to leading in Balsam with a minor in Spruce. (Note: it not uncommon for the operator to prefer Pine and Spruce because it is more valuable when sold to a sawmill). The inventory stocking (density) class may be reduced.

Over the next few years some of the large trees will fall naturally or be blown down by wind. The operator talked about the impact of heavy equipment on the tree roots in forest floor. He felt this would probably promote windfall. He had already removed some recent fallen trees because of wind or damaged roots. There won't be any regeneration to replace the large old trees for many years. Shrubs and some trees will eventually re-establish in 3 to 5 years.

Fire risk reduction treatments, as I understand them, will probably need to be done again within 5 years to remove regenerated trees and shrubs and any newly downed trees to keep the fuel levels below 15 tons/ha.

I am not sure why the B.C. Wildfire Service was trying to retain overstory, but it is my understanding that they were trying 'shade' the forest floor, so it won't dry out and become a fuel hazard. (Not confirmed).

It is easy to see why this area was targeted for WRR treatment. It was high in 'fuel loading' which is a common characteristic of Old Growth. The treatment prescription indicated that the Biogeoclimatic Sub Zone is Sub Boreal Spruce dry cool. (The amount of Balsam indicated it was in a transition zone to the Sub Boreal Spruce moist cold). Old Growth in this subzone is extremely rare in the Bulkley Valley. It should not be targeted.

Given the known resilience of Old Growth to fire, I think treating Old Growth in this way won't either retain Old Growth resilience or significantly reduce the wildfire risk.

Bob Mitchell RPF Ret'
Member Bulkley Valley Community Resource Board