

OLD FOREST – CURRENT CONDITION, DEFERRALS AND RESILIENCE

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SUMMARY

In 2019 the province created an Old Growth Strategic Review Panel (Garry Merkel and Al Gorley). Their OGSR report was submitted to the province in April 2020, and released publicly in September 2020.

OLD FOREST CONDITION

As an input to the Merkel / Gorley process we¹ produced a report examining the condition of old forests in the province. The report highlighted that 13 million hectares of old forest remains in BC, 80% of which is small or very small trees such as bog and high elevation forests; less than 3% of old forest is the large, tall tree forest that most people associate with old-growth forest.

Key Finding: The large tree old forests that historically dominated many landscapes are at extremely high risk today. These forests have very high value culturally, ecologically and for carbon. Unless they are in a park, they are poorly protected by current provincial policy, including in Great Bear Rainforest.

CREATING BREATHING ROOM FOR CONVERSATION

The Old Growth Strategic Review (OGSR) Panel identified a need for **immediate logging deferrals of the highest value, most at risk old forest** in the province. **Deferrals are intended to retain options** during ongoing land-use planning discussions with First Nations, and to allow time for the OGSR recommended paradigm shift in forest management that puts First Nations rights and interests, ecological integrity and long-term community stability as priorities over timber volume.

The Old Growth Strategic Review report lists a series of criteria to be used to identify the most important old forest needing immediate deferrals, based on a high risk of irreversible biodiversity loss.

In a continuation of our work on this issue (Price, Holt and Daust 2021²), we created a map that identifies which forests, distributed across forested ecosystems in BC, best meet the criteria outlined in the OGSR report. We identified ~1.3 million hectares (roughly 2.6% of the forested landbase) as candidate options, a small subset of which will actually require deferral.

Key Finding: Our candidate options map shows the top 3% of tallest and largest forests in every ecosystem, plus mapped ancient forests (older than 300/ 500 years), and many rare old patches.

Meaningful deferrals prevent harvest of areas that would otherwise be harvested. The Candidate Options map should be a) overlaid with existing proposed cut blocks and roads to identify actual risks to these areas. Locally known important areas of old forest not identified in our mapping should also be assessed for risk of harvest and deferred where immediate threat exists.

¹ Price, K., R.F.Holt and D.Daust. Two versions available:

<https://veridianecological.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/bcs-old-growth-forest-report-web.pdf>

And in a peer reviewed journal: <https://cdnsiencepub.com/doi/full/10.1139/cjfr-2020-0453>

Available Information: our mapping provides First Nations, and others, with information on the largest and tallest (mapped) forests in every ecosystem in BC, in increments of the best 1%, 3%, 5% and 10%. Plus, mapped ancient and 'rare' forests (with less than 10% remaining).

Our work provides an approach to look at remaining old forest transparently, through an ecological lens.

Note: old growth deferrals do nothing to reduce the extreme high risk in areas of the province where little to no old growth remains. Areas of concern include southern Kootenays, southern interior, northern interior valley bottoms, and all drier coastal forest ecosystems. Protection of mature second growth forest will be essential to recovery of values in these areas. We have not included recruitment on this old forest deferral map, but can provide additional information on this issue.

LAND-USE PLANNING, RESILIENCE AND 'PARADIGM SHIFT'

The Merkel/ Gorley report outlined a bigger picture – a **paradigm shift** of how to manage forests:

- Full involvement of indigenous leaders,
- Declare conservation of ecosystem health and biodiversity of forests as an overarching priority, and enact legislation that legally establishes that priority,
- Transparency around data, especially on old forests,
- Prioritize old forest planning and recruitment planning,
- Improve many aspects of management (for example, meet **existing** old targets, improve old forest targets, stop clearcutting, ensure effective restoration, create robust transition strategies for communities), etc.

Available Information: we are using the mapping of the largest and tallest provincial forests, plus other values, to create a potential approach to managing for resilient landscapes.

We map 30 – 50% of the province, considering remaining old forests, recruitment needs, wildlife values, fragmentation, different ecosystems, climate change and other values.

Available information: a draft resilience map available to all interested First Nations, and others, shortly.

FOLLOW-UP:

More information is available:

- Old forest condition: <https://veridianecological.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/bcs-old-growth-forest-report-web.pdf>
- Candidate deferral areas - at veridianecological.ca
- Resilience mapping – available shortly

We are pleased to provide follow-up technical briefings and support to use this work.