Imagine

A Speech by James D. Petersen
Executive Director, The Evergreen Foundation
2007 President, Pacific Logging Congress

"Big Puzzle – Many Small Pieces"
Coastal Community Values Panel
65th Annual TLA Convention and Expo
Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Center
Wednesday, January 16, 2008

I have been asked to compare the timber industry/government relationship in the United States with the timber industry/government relationship in Canada, with the caveat that I can make this call as I see it, which very likely will not be how you see it.

But as they say, anyone who has traveled more than 50 miles from home is considered an expert, to be accorded all the rights, privileges and courtesies of such experts.

So imagine with me while I walk you through a comparison of the government and industry relationships in our two countries.

Imagine that you no longer have a voice in provincial forestry decision-making, none. Say what you will, but it carries no weight.

Imagine that any citizen living in British Columbia can oppose your harvest plan – and that person's voice suddenly has more power than *all* of provincial voices that might be raised in support of your harvest plan.

Imagine living in a country with a "Sue the bastards" mentality. That's the United States today. Any malcontent, any social misfit, any anarchist can go to court and stop a harvest plan in its tracks. There are environmental litigators standing on every street corner in the land who will gladly take the case for nothing. Why would a lawyer take a case for no money: because under our federal Equal Access to Justice Act, our taxpayers are forced to reimburse the lawyers for their court costs. This is how several of our most radical environmental groups fund their work. Creating and exploiting conflict has become a billion dollar industry in our country.

Imagine that your provincial government has surrendered your citizen voice to the most radical environmentalists living among you – and now says openly that those radical voices have constitutionally guaranteed rights that you don't hold.

Imagine the unintended metamorphosis of a well intended federal law designed to protect fish, wildlife and plant species. It becomes the most powerful law in your country and is now used at will to stop any harvest plan, any plan for salvaging dead timber, any plan for development of any natural resource in your province: timber, minerals, water or energy.

Imagine that your British Columbia government is now so afraid of the political power it has given to environmental groups that it cannot muster the will or the courage to stop them from destroying your economy.

Imagine a day when your British Columbia government will no longer grant timberland licenses – and will instead acquiesce to B.C. taxpayers who believe their timber should be sold at auction to the highest bidder.

Imagine if your *federal* government owned the timber on which your livelihood depends. Would it be willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with you as your provincial governments have been, or would the anti-forestry views of those who live in Canada's major cities be they only voices they heeded?

Imagine that your government no longer believes your industry is of any redeeming economic, environmental or social value – and does not care one whit whether or not your business survives

The nightmare scenario I have just described has already come true in the formerly united states of America. I say "formerly" because ours is now a country divided – bitterly so I might add. We who live in rural environs share little in common with our urban countrymen. For that matter, we who live in rural environs often disagree loudly amongst ourselves as to the manner of management of our natural resources, especially our forests.

If you were a logger in the United States, instead of British Columbia, you would be logging for a private landowner, an Indian tribe or a saw mill that has purchased a state timber sale. Otherwise, you would not be logging at all. You would be flat broke – or you would have sold your equipment at auction a decade ago and found something else to do.

In western Montana, where I live, those that still log have diversified. In addition to logging and hauling timber, they also clear land for developers and haul gravel. A few pick up work occasionally cutting fire breaks around communities under contract to our Forest Service. We call this "stewardship contracting" and it is the sum total of our federal forest timber management program on more than 140 million acres of overstocked and dying federal timberland in the western U.S.; land that is in Condition Class 3 – meaning it is ready to burn – or Condition Class 2, meaning it soon will be.

Many of you are probably sitting out there saying to yourselves, “Oh boy, more opportunity for us to import lumber to the states.” While I admire your opportunism, may I remind you that our housing industry, which is a major market for your lumber producers, has collapsed and isn’t expected to recover much until mid-2009. More problematic though is the weakness of the U.S. dollar and new found strength of your Canadian dollar – to be sure, a two-edged sword for proud Canadian workers who now account for some 30 percent of the lumber we Americans consume

The malaise in our housing industry gives you ample time to contemplate the true meaning of what I’ve just said about the relationship between our government and our forest products industry – and what will very likely happen here in British Columbia if you don’t change your ways.

Before I proceed though, let me say that it was Jim Girvan who invited me to visit with you this morning – and it is Jim who hopes with all his heart that I can wake you from your gentle sleep before it is too late. Dave Lewis told me last week in an e-mail that he believes you are 20-30 years behind us. At the risk of sounding like an alarmist, I doubt you have more than 10 years to shore up the public opinion dikes.

Barring a social and cultural transformation in the United States, it is already too late for us. We will never have a federal timber sale program again, which is an economic calamity for those of us who live in the rural West, where 70 percent of all timberland is owned by our federal government. Hundreds of rural counties scattered across the West face financial ruin. One county in southern Oregon recently laid off most of its deputy sheriffs. Another closed all of it libraries. In western Montana rural roads and bridges are falling into disrepair. There is no money to fix them.

I submit to you that the same thing could very easily happen here in British Columbia. *We* at least have the good fortune to have a great deal of very productive, privately owned timberland, as well as state and tribal forest land that is still well managed for timber production. You have few such luxuries here in Canada.

Much of what I know about what you do have here in British Columbia – and in Canada's other timber producing provinces – I learned in the course of producing an issue of *Evergreen* Magazine that dealt in some detail with forests and forestry in your country. What a breath of fresh air it was to be in a country that still practices science-based forestry on its publicly owned lands – a country in which provincial and federal governments are still strong and vocal supporters of their forest products industry. And how very refreshing it was to visit with one of your country's leading environmentalists and learn that he found litigation to be, in his words, "unseemly and socially destructive."

Hopeful signs indeed, but do not place too much faith in your government or its ability to protect you from national and global environmental pressures. You may be surprised to learn that the U.S. government and our country's timber industry worked hand in glove for more than 70 years. We were of like mind on all of the big issues, protecting forests from wildfire, insects and diseases, protecting our soil and water, balancing growth and harvest, replanting after harvest and creating jobs; pretty much the same way it is up here.

Everything began to change in the U.S. after the inaugural Earth Day in 1970. I could run through the litany of laws that were passed in the name of “saving forests” but I won’t bother because their titles won’t mean much to you. Let me simply say that they are the “nightmare scenario laws” we now struggle against.

How could such a thing happen in our country? It was easy. Our timber industry did not appreciate or respect the growing political power environmentalists were amassing in our nation’s capitol. Quite the opposite, they mainly ignored it until it was too late.

When I entered the fray in 1985, the only storyline the industry was willing to buy from its public relations consultants was “Jobs, jobs, jobs.” Those signing paychecks believed to the depths of their souls that their best argument against the threatened species listing of the Northern Spotted Owl was jobs. And who can blame them? These men had in fact created hundreds of thousands of post-World War II jobs in logging and sawmilling. Was the public going to turn its back on all that they had created that was good for communities, good for states, good for forests and good for the nation?

As it turns out, the stunning answer to this Tsunami of All Questions was, “Yes.”

I regret to say I could see this “Yes” coming from a hundred miles distant – and could do nothing about it. The industry had its mind made up. It would win or lose on the jobs issue. It lost – and so did some 80,000 woods and millworkers.

When Jim Girvan was in Hawaii at our Pacific Logging Congress convention last November he gave a presentation in which he lamented job losses in Canada’s timber industry – and more so – the fact that timber is apparently no longer B.C.’s No. 1 employer. I am not surprised. Your industry is undergoing the same technological torture test that our industry has been undergoing in stages for more than 25 years. Each stage brings more efficient and more globally competitive wood processing. That’s code for job losses. Put simply, machines are replacing men – and must continue to do so if you expect to be at all competitive on the global stage.

But if you stake your claim to the jobs engine – as we did – you will lose your timber supply because the plain and ugly fact is that very few people living here in Vancouver or in any of Canada’s major cities give a damn whether you even have a job, because they think all you’re doing is destroying nature everywhere you go. If the debate is between jobs and the planet you will lose every time.

At some level, I understood this long before many of my colleagues in the association game did, but I had no power in the ivory towers where the industry mapped its strategy for running the environmentalists out of town on a rail. Obviously, it did not work.

In hindsight, I believe that on *Evergreen* pages we did a spectacular job of arguing the case for making political decisions about forests and forestry based on the best science available. And for a number of years it worked very well, but in the end, our country has also turned its back on science. Now we make decisions based on whatever feelings we are wearing on our pajama sleeves when we get up in the morning.

For this reason, we no longer salvage timber from national forests after wildfires. Environmentalists insist such activity does more harm than good. It is, in the words of one extremist, “like mugging a burn victim.”

Imagine what would happen in British Columbia if your provincial forestry folks announced that beetle salvage in the Interior must cease tomorrow because they fear salvaging dead timber will only make things worse. Of course, they will not be able to offer any proof of this astonishing assertion - only feelings: feelings that will suddenly have more power than a century of easily photographed research that proves that salvage and reforestation after wildfire or insect or disease infestation can perform wonders on badly damaged landscapes.

Or, imagine if one of your environmental groups said it was okay to salvage so long as the salvaged timber was piled and burned or buried in the ground. The reason for this action is, of course, to keep the “greedy timber industry” from profiting from nature’s ills - ills these groups believe were caused by the industry in the first place. They allege that if we hadn’t harvested the timber sixty or seventy or eighty years ago we would not have these massive forest die-offs today, so by implication loggers and greedy lumbermen are to blame for the West's increasingly frequent and evermore destructive wildfires. Our environmental extremists hate capitalism more than they love the environment.

I know this sounds crazy, and I'm pretty sure most of you think it could never happen here in BC, but keep in mind that very few people in the U.S. ever believed it could ever happen in the Cradle of Capitalism – but it did – and in its shortsighted view of forest education programs, our industry is partly to blame for the misery that has befallen it.

But the truth be told, our timber industry is not an industry in the same sense that the steel, oil and automotive industries are industries. We do have a few very large publicly traded companies in the U.S., but with a couple of exceptions they are mainly pulp and paper producers.

Throughout our country's history most of our timber and lumber has been cut and processed by smaller, family-owned companies - second and third generation affairs that are deeply rooted in their communities. These companies – loggers and sawmillers - have been Evergreen Magazine's lifeblood for a long time. We are friends. We have been through a lot together.

But the fact that our timber industry is not an industry has made it very difficult for us to agree on strategy and tactics. So we frequently send our Congress mixed signals on very important matters, including our now long gone federal timber sale program. The big publicly traded companies that own timberland spent years looking for ways to kill the federal timber sale program – the lifeblood of most of our family-owned mills - because federal logs competed directly with their logs in the marketplace. The collapse of our federal program, which was precipitated mainly by the spotted owl listing, was no skin off their noses. In fact, it helped them.

But it has done nothing for the public dialogue, publicly owned forests or the communities where our family-owned mills were the social, cultural and economic lodestones for generations. We are surrounded by death, not just in our forests but in our communities. Our saw mills are gone – auctioned to the highest bidder or by the pound to scrap iron dealers. Our grass roots leaders have given up and our communicators have moved on, leaving behind an eerie silence that fills the air with tension and uncertainty. No one knows what comes next. Tourism was supposed to be our salvation, but tourism does not offer family wage jobs, so most of our young people – the next generation, our genetic code – are moving on too. We are losing much more than money or intellectual capital. We are losing our future.

I do not know where this all ends, but I can tell you that the U.S. West may in years to come not be the lucrative lumber market that it has been for you. Our middle-class quality of life is in decline. We are moving toward a two-class society: those who expect to be waited on and those who do the waiting. But my guess is that the jet setters who have found Montana to be so much to their liking will also start moving on soon. They don't like the choking smoke that accompanies our dreadfully long wildfire seasons. It interferes with golf and tennis and dinner on the deck. What's the point of owning a ten million dollar summer home in the backwoods of western

Montana if you can’t see anything from your floor-to-ceiling front room windows but smoke?

Jim asked that I offer up some advice on what you might do to avert similar disaster here in British Columbia. I’ve never been very good at this because I tend to be too frank. Besides, I am from the States and we are and always will be competitors – of late contentiously so. Lost amid the din is a realization that you do not have a constitutionally guaranteed right to sell your lumber in the United States, anymore than we Americans have a constitutional right to sell our goods and services here in Canada. Sometimes we get along and sometimes we don’t. That’s the often contentious nature of competition between countries that trade their goods in the global marketplace. And since I know I am going to get asked, I will state for the record that I am an American and I will always side with my friends who own sawmills and employee people and do good work in their communities. I would expect the same response from you were I to ask.

Be that as it may, I will offer a few suggestions that I hope prove helpful, first because one of my grandfathers was a logger in the big white pine forests of northern Idaho nearly a century ago, and second because I have great admiration for the work you do at the moment of resurrection – the end of the life of an old forest and the beginning of the life of a new one.

Now to my suggestions:

First, and foremost, forget job impacts. Beyond rural environs, no one cares. Besides, automation in woods and milling operations is taking its own toll. Your adversaries will use this fact against you.

Second, explain how what you do benefits forests and society, not the jobs argument but the ecological arguments that have to do with forest health, species and age class diversity and habitat conservation. If you cannot recite these arguments– and do it honestly – you will lose.

Third, be damned sure of your science and your scientists. We have several who've gone astray in pursuit of federal grant monies which, of course, always come with political strings attached to them. Virtually all forest research money available today in the United States is funneled to those engaged in "saving" old growth forests. Nature can't save old growth forests. What on earth makes us think we can?

Fourth, there are no silver bullets you can chamber and no magic potions you can buy from snake oil salesmen that will bail you out of this mess. Only you can do it, though based on my experiences in my own country, I'm suspect you will never come to consensus on what to do or how to do it. You will from time to time toss money at various silver bullet schemes, and when they do not work, you will say to one another, "See, I told you forestry education is a waste of money."

Fifth, forestry education is a cost of doing business. And it is damned hard work. And it is expensive, though not nearly as expensive as our failure to communicate has been.

Sixth, forestry education must be practiced daily, just like forestry itself. When it is done in fits and starts – as it still is in the U.S. – it has little or no lasting value with people or in forests.

Seventh, build coalitions in a way that isolates radicals. Seek the support of your hunters and fishers, editorial writers, elected officials, forest scientists, First Nations, the clergy, civic groups, garden clubs and business leaders. And yes, seek the support of your own employees. You'd be amazed at the number of people working in sawmills and logging camps who are only there for a paycheck and would slit your proverbial throat in an instant if they thought they could get away with it.

Eighth, hire a well known opinion pollster who is widely respected in political circles. Instruct your pollster to find out exactly what the public thinks about you, about timber harvesting and about your issues. And for heaven's sake, be honest with yourselves. Don't design questions that will only give you the answers you want to hear. This is the biggest bonehead mistake businesses make. You want the public to have every opportunity to tell you - through your pollster - to go straight to hell.

Ninth, share the results of your polling and focus group work with your elected officials, especially those who are riding the fence. They need to know where B.C. residents stand on your issues.

Tenth, use the results of your polling and focus group work to build a long running forestry education offensive – a campaign if you will, just like any other political campaign. This campaign will provide the political cover your elected officials will need in order to act on your behalf.

Eleventh, make very sure that you are adequately funded over the long haul. This is the biggest internal hurdle you will face. It is easy to find money when lumber markets are red hot, as they were four years ago, but when markets are in the tank, as they are now, it is next to impossible to sustain forestry education programs.

Twelfth, hire the best forestry communicators money can buy; listen carefully to what they tell you, do exactly what they say and pay them well. They are going to save you from disaster. And yes, the light at the end of the tunnel is the locomotive.

Last, the paraphrased wisdom of an old publisher friend who when calling on past due advertising accounts used to say, “I can understand anything but silence.”

I have modified his wisdom ever so slightly to say that “The *public* can understand anything but silence.” Your silence creates opportunities for your adversaries to fill the public’s head with declarations, images and worries that simply aren’t true. From experience, I can tell you it is extremely difficult – and very expensive – to un-ring this bell.

I will close out my brief time with you this morning with a story about an old friend who was unquestionably the best lawyer the timber industry in the United States ever had. His name was Leonard Netzorg. He died a few years ago – and since then I have felt duty-bound to repeat his wisdoms whenever I speak publicly. One evening in the late 1980s, we were sitting at his dining room table enjoying our second or third glass of homemade plum sherry, discussing political events that were shaking our industry at its very roots, when he out of the blue he said so memorable that I hurried to write it down so that I could share it with others. Here is what he said:

“There is no perfect truth that can guide us forward. The larger issues of our time, including those swirling about our forests, require separating society’s material wants from its spiritual needs.

“Society has demonstrated an unwillingness to vest in scientists the final authority to make decisions that affect the rest of us. We insist that our non-scientific views be heard, that we whose lives are affected have the right to participate in the decision-making and policy processes that flow from today’s scientific facts.

“Meanwhile, the timber industry is going to have to learn how to share these forests with others who have different values and want different things from the forest. Frankly, I welcome it and I rue the day when polarized factions no longer tear away at the fabric of our society.

“The American Revolution is still going on. We are still changing, still learning. If some of us were not constantly tearing away at what others of us think we know, we would all still think the earth flat. What is science today will be witchcraft tomorrow.”

I suspect that the Canadian Revolution is just beginning. And if I am right, then Leonard Netzorg's final wisdom is just as applicable in British Columbia as it has been in the United States.

Thank you.