

FORT NELSON FIRST NATION - NORTHERN ROCKIES REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY

TRUST, PARTNERSHIP, AND FORESTS



PATHWAY OVERVIEW

Incorporated in 2009, the Northern Rockies Regional Municipality (NRRM) is the first Regional Municipality in BC, encompassing 10% of British Columbia's landmass. A large portion of the NRRM is located within the territory of Fort Nelson First Nation (FNFN), a Nation of Dene and Cree people who have lived there for thousands of years, and is adjacent to the Town of Fort Nelson. Today, the NRRM and FNFN enjoy close ties not only in proximity, but also due to longstanding friendships, co-operative efforts with respect to regional development issues, and a strong partnership in creating one of the largest community forests in BC history.

PATHWAY ACTIVITIES

The collaborative pathway activities undertaken by NRRM and FNFN includes the following.



**Protocol and
Communications Agreements**



**Land Use Planning
and Development**



**Joint Economic
Development Initiatives**

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2006, the Town of Fort Nelson was booming and was awarded the title of Forest Capital of British Columbia by the Association of BC Forest Professionals. The communities around Fort Nelson relied heavily on the profits earned and jobs created by forestry, as well as the oil and gas, tourism, and agriculture sectors. However, in 2008 the two forestry related mills in Fort Nelson (PolarBoard OSB Mill and Tackama Plywood Mill) were shuttered due to the global economic crisis. This led to significant job losses, although at this time many workers found employment in the Oil & Gas Industry.

In a collective and proactive effort to address these challenges, the first discussions between the two communities (Northern Rockies Regional Municipality (NRRM)

and Fort Nelson First Nation (FNFN) started in 2009. At this time the province had allocated an 18,000-cubic-metre allowable annual cut (AAC) for a community forest. Both communities chose to pursue a community forest at this time although it was recognized and acknowledged that it would one day make sense for them to collaborate on a joint project, like a Community Forest Agreement (CFA).

In 2013 and 2014, the NRRM initiated a Forestry Rejuvenation Project, which had the potential to act as a political roundtable for forestry discussions between leaders from the FNFN, NRRM and Province of BC. The goals of this initiative were to increase local administration, marketing and strategic decision making for the local forests. In addition, it provided a platform from which to better react to perceived

threats to the economic future of forests within the NRRM. The initiative has enjoyed much success in its response to boreal caribou restoration, the 2016 timber supply review (TSR4), forest tenure reform, marketing of the Aspen forest resource and building a collaborative working relationship with First Nations partners.

Compounding the challenges the communities faced with the forestry industry decline, the regional oil and gas industry virtually collapsed in 2015 / 2016, leading to significant job losses and an overall regional population decline as people left for work in Alberta and other parts of BC. This has resulted in significant decreases in property values and further job losses in supporting and service industries. The collapse helped galvanize the two communities' recognition of the importance of local control and influence of the resource economy and the forestry sector in particular.

In 2016, representatives from both the NRRM and FNFN started to redouble their efforts in advocating for the creation of a CFA with the Province, with the area based tenure managed directly by a FNFN and NRRM partnership corporation.

After over two years of hard work, a working group from the two communities completed the Community Forest Agreement application and announced the submission of their application to the Province in October 2018.

OUTCOMES

On July 16, 2019, the Fort Nelson Community Forest was approved by the Province, a partnership with FNFN and the NRRM. The agreement has an Allowable Annual Cut (AAC) of 217,650 cubic metres from 191,571 hectares of Crown land, including a BC Timber Sales volume reservation of 32,650 cubic meters annually for the part of the land base that includes BC Timber Sales operating area. This is the largest community forest granted in BC in both AAC and tenure area. The second positive development was provided through the announcement by the province's deputy chief forester of a 59% increase from the previous AAC of 1,625,000 cubic metres set in 2006. The new AAC for the Fort Nelson Timber Supply Area is now 2,582,350 cubic metres.

When Chief Sharleen Gale received the news, she was ecstatic and filled with hope. She stressed "We need jobs. We need economy in Fort Nelson and our communities are working together to find ways where we can bring back tourism, where we can bring back forestry, and ways that we can be prepared for the next oil and gas boom." Excited about these two important building blocks for future forestry initiatives, NRRM Mayor Gary Foster said he was, "dancing on the ceiling" with the best news the region has had "in a decade".

With the NRRM having long standing interests in obtaining a CFA, and the FNFN having strong cultural, spiritual, and economic interests of land management in their traditional territory, these announcements were a resounding moment of success for the two governments. This CFA is expected to lead to innovative stewardship management of local forests in the region, with an overall goal of rebuilding a resilient and secure regional economy that provides economic, social, and cultural benefits to those living in the region. Managed by a joint partnership, leaders from both communities are now working to ensure that investment dollars stay in the community and local forestry users are supported.

Proposed economic prospects for the CFA will help to rebuild the regional forestry industry, increase associated jobs and spin off revenue, and generate revenue from log sales to be reinvested back into both partner communities. To make certain that treaty rights of the FNFN are not infringed, the CFA has strategies that maintain, and where possible, enhance caribou habitat, integrate the rights and activities of trappers, manage mixed species forest ecosystems, maintain ecosystem health, and utilize innovative natural resource management practices. Additionally, a Land Management Framework was developed as a part of the process which details core areas to consider in order to meet FNFN land stewardship objectives while also meeting the CFA objectives.

Community Forest Agreements

Community Forest Agreements are long-term, area-based land tenures. They are designed to encourage community involvement in the management of local forests while expanding economic opportunities and opening doors for local job creation. Of the Community Forests in BC nearly half are operated by First Nations or by partnerships between First Nations and neighboring non-Indigenous communities.



Running parallel to the CFA process, and incorporating the CFA objectives within it, the NRRM announced in June 2019 the completion of its Regional Economic Strategy (RES). With the guiding notion of “none of us is as smart as all of us”, the RES proposes and details numerous actions covering three strategic areas: empowering the community, strengthening community vitality, and advancing business development. By reaching out to FNFN when developing the RES, the NRRM was able to involve and develop mutually beneficial actions for both communities through strategy workshops and council meetings. Implementation of the strategy is currently underway and will be supported by an 80% grant funding from the BC Rural Dividend Program.

In order to bring prosperity to a region once in decline, these two communities continue to support one another by building on their existing trust and friendship and collaborating on mutually beneficial initiatives.

Meeting to Build and Maintain Partnerships

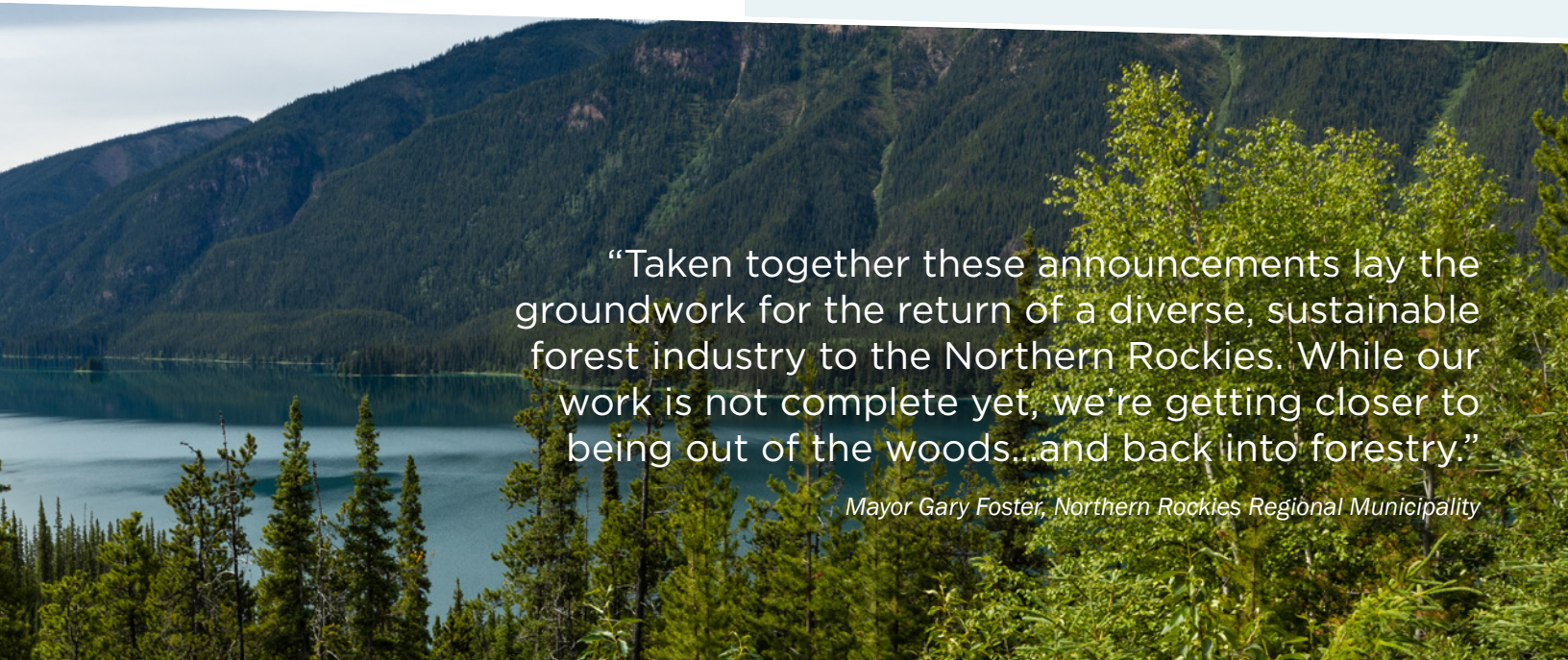
Staff and leaders amongst the NRRM and the FNFN are building their relationship on a foundation of trust and friendship. They utilize two forms of communication to keep their relationship sustained:

- **Regular meetings** between staff of the FNFN and NRRM, where information can be exchanged.
- **Consistent informal communications** between staff and leadership that continues the conversation and allows for both communities to build and maintain friendships.

LESSONS LEARNED AND KEYS TO SUCCESS

The main takeaway from this partnership was for the two governing bodies to take a “one community approach” in developing their CFA and regional planning initiatives. Lessons learned and keys to success included:

- ✓ **A ‘one-community’ approach.** Consider working together as ‘one community’, where cooperation provides mutually beneficial agreements, strategies, and developments that ensure positive growth for all those in the region.
- ✓ **Make time for informal discussion.** Good relationships depend on the frequency of conversations amongst parties, take the time to call one another.
- ✓ **Find shared principles to move forward on.** From communication to management principles, co-develop a set of mutually shared principles to guide the relationship.
- ✓ **Acknowledge the other community’s reality.** Learning and accepting the reality and context of another community you’re partnering with is integral to a relationship, incorporate this reality into your objectives.
- ✓ **Build on a foundation of trust and friendship.** Use preexisting relationships, or work on developing them if they haven’t been built, in order to grow trust and friendship between partners.



“Taken together these announcements lay the groundwork for the return of a diverse, sustainable forest industry to the Northern Rockies. While our work is not complete yet, we’re getting closer to being out of the woods...and back into forestry.”

Mayor Gary Foster, Northern Rockies Regional Municipality



Photo by Chris Gale

“It is amazing what can be done when a local First Nation and a municipality come together to form a true partnership. One that honors and values the people who have been here for thousands of years and is beneficial to all residents living in the area. This is an example of reconciliation that we can all be proud of.”

Chief Sharleen Gale, Fort Nelson First Nation

PATHWAYS TO COLLABORATION

Pathways to Collaboration is a joint initiative of the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM), the Province of British Columbia, and the First Nations Summit with funding from the Indigenous Business & Investment Council (IBIC). The project aims to showcase the growing number of successful economic development collaborations and partnerships between First Nations and local governments, while highlighting lessons learned and key steps to success.

The pathways to collaboration communities take are unique, reflecting the context of the communities involved, and involve different activities. Common pathway activities include protocol and communications agreements; servicing agreements and shared infrastructure projects; collaborative land use planning and development projects; joint economic development initiatives; and shared tourism projects. Like signposts along a pathway, these pathway activities are identified in the case study series.

For more information on the project, please contact the communities profiled, or visit www.ubcm.ca



Indigenous Business and Investment Council
Sharing Success