

Birch Agroforestry Industry Development

Within the interior of British Columbia, paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*, also known as White Birch or Canoe Birch) is abundant on both private and provincial forestlands. It typically grows on lowlands to lower mountain slopes and is a shade intolerant species; as such, it thrives well on previously burned and / or harvested sites where it may form pure stands. As the forest matures, it usually is restricted to openings.

Commercial, paper birch use in the region is primarily limited to small amounts of traditional wood products including flooring, lumber, oriented strand board (OSB) and fuelwood. However, there is growing interest and demand for non-timber products from birch. Currently, in addition to some “backyard”, hobby operations, there are two commercial birch syrup businesses in the province, both located in the Cariboo region: **Birch Place Farm** in Quesnel - producing Sugar Spring Classic Birch Syrup, and **Sweet Tree Ventures** in Big Lake. In 2005, the two commercial producers collected approximately 68,000 litres of raw sap and produced approximately 790 litres of finished syrup. Both sell most of their product directly to the consumer and through a variety of retail outlets, farmers markets and fairs in the region and throughout BC. Limited sales over the internet have also occurred with distribution across Canada and into the United States of America. The commercial producers indicate current demand exceeds production, and interest in their natural, unique products is growing.

Despite the opportunity for new operations or products from birch, at present, there are no publications or training materials available to support prospective practitioners in BC interested in birch agroforestry. To address this information and technology transfer gap, the **Quesnel Community and Economic Development Corporation** (QCEDC), with funding assistance from the **BC Agroforestry Industry Development Initiative**, is sponsoring a Birch Agroforestry Industry Development program. The goals of this program are to support: (i) the development and expansion of a paper birch based agroforestry, and (ii) to promote value-added products from the same, to assist with diversifying and strengthening the regional economy.

To meet these goals, the QCEDC, is facilitating stronger partnerships with the current birch syrup businesses, regional agricultural producers, *Harvest*, the organising body for the **Quesnel “Old Time” Farmers Market**, and any other interested individuals or organizations. Together they will work to improve access to birch agroforestry information and support technology transfer with the development of a guidebook, new products research and training sessions.

Specifically, the program will research and compile existing information and producer knowledge on birch tapping and sap processing into a user-friendly guidebook / production manual for prospective birch agroforestry practitioners. The QCEDC and its partners will also deliver a minimum of two workshops in the spring of 2007 and 2008 providing:

- An overview and on-farm demonstration of birch tapping;
- An overview and on-farm demonstration of birch syrup processing;
- Information on relevant processing food safety and labelling regulations; and,
- Markets and marketing information and training.

In looking to future development of the sector, research and a pre-feasibility assessment of potential new niche birch products will also be completed. In addition to syrup, other birch products from agroforestry systems could be developed including sap drinks (birch tonic, birch

wine, birch sap-fruit juice blends), crafts (from wood and bark) and non-traditional wood products.

Development and expansion of birch agroforestry in the Cariboo is expected to benefit individual producers by diversifying their agricultural or woodlot production and thereby increasing incomes. Secondly, it will strengthen and diversify the economy of the region and contribute to mitigating the expected economic slowdown in the coming decade as a result of the Mountain Pine Beetle (MPB) epidemic.

The QCEDC is the designated economic development agency of the City of Quesnel. The City is located in the North Cariboo, and is one of the most forest-industry dependent communities in Canada, and faces challenges posed by both globalisation and technology advances. It is also severely affected by the MPB crisis which, according to BC's Chief Forester, is a "catastrophe" that will result in a reduction in timber harvesting in about 10 years of at least 40%, and as much as 70% when compared to recent levels. Because an estimated 4,500 direct jobs in the Quesnel area are dependent on the current timber harvest, a 40% reduction in the timber supply is anticipated to cause substantial, unprecedented economic adjustment. The agriculture sector has long been a key to the economy of the Cariboo. It is deeply rooted in the history and culture of the area and it has provided a component of economic stability. Investing in agroforestry and other such integrated opportunities is an essential link to diversifying the future regional economy. As such, the opportunity to expand the existing birch syrup industry and to promote the Cariboo as a primary producer of a variety of birch products fits well with overall community and economic development plans of the region.

Jim Savage, Executive Director at the QCEDC is pleased to be supporting agroforestry development and sees long-term benefits from the program: "The improved availability of 'producer-friendly' information is a key to the expansion of the birch syrup industry, and to develop other birch agroforestry products and new markets." Additionally, the networking and partnerships developed to implement this project will form a basis for future industry development and co-operation on projects of mutual benefit, where currently no formal industry structure exists. Savage sees the benefits of the program extending beyond the life of this project: "The QCEDC is committed to supporting the development of the long-term capacity in this area and will support industry-building activities beyond the scope of the Agroforestry Initiative funding term."

Although this project is being developed as a regional initiative, it also has the possibility of reaching and benefiting interested persons throughout a much larger area (i.e. wherever paper birch grows in BC). Interested individuals or groups from outside the region are welcome to participate in the training sessions. For more information on the Birch Agroforestry Development program, please contact the Quesnel Community and Economic Development Corporation at (250) 992-3522 or email them at mail@quesnelcorp.com