The year 2012 marks the 100th Anniversary of the British Columbia Forest Service (BCFS). The Forest Branch, which later became the BCFS, was established within the Department of Lands in 1912 to protect and manage the vast and diverse forests of the province. H.R. MacMillan of MacMillan Bloedel fame was the first Chief Forester from 1912–1915. The goals and objectives of the Service have been varied and diverse over the course of its history but all were designed to safeguard, promote and sustain the many facets of forest management throughout the province. Since its creation, the Forest Service has faced many challenges but has also accomplished many things. The overall goal, however, remains: to protect the public’s interest and provide world-class leadership in the use of BC’s forest and rangelands.

The forest resources of the province have been used for centuries, beginning with numerous Aboriginal groups, then European explorers and, with the birth of Canada, by Canadians. The first recorded use by Europeans was in 1778 by Captain James Cook. The gold rush of 1858 played an important role in the development of the interior of the province and increased the demand for lumber. Finally, by the latter half of the 1800s, BC’s logging operations and mills were well established.

The origins of the Forest Service can be traced back to the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Timber and Forestry of July 1909, which made 21 recommendations on forest management. The first Forest Act was drafted to implement those recommendations. Unfortunately, the First World War had a negative impact on the Service, as it did on many other “non-essential” aspects of the government. Not only did the government have to move funding elsewhere to pay for the war effort causing a significant decrease in research, but also the workforce was severely depleted due to enlistments. However, one positive outcome was the improvement in technology that could be used in all aspects of forest management. For example, there was an increased use of aircraft during the war that resulted in improved fire detection and suppression efforts post-WW1. There was also a massive effort to reforest part of Europe, and therefore new tree planting and cone collection techniques were developed and used in British Columbia. BC provided a core of knowledgeable workers and was a significant seed source during those reforestation efforts.

As with many forest services in the country, research into better ways to manage and harvest the forest are important parts of the job, and the BCFS was no different. In 1921, the first research program was the responsibility of James Alexander, who focused on timber utilization, slash disposal, natural regeneration, growth and yield, and fire protection. In 1923 it was recommended that an enlarged research program be established within the BCFS and by 1927 the Research Division had been created with a staff of seven and annual expenditures of $34 000.

At the end of the Second World War the Forest Service reported to its own Deputy Minister and was housed within the Department of Lands, Forests and Water Resources. The year 1958 proved to be challenging as it was the worst fire season in the history of the province. Over 4000 fires, caused by railways, lightning and the public consumed more than 835 000 hectares, mostly in the Prince George Forest District.

By the 1970s, the Research Division had expanded and expenditures and staff levels doubled. The approach to research also shifted during this time with more emphasis placed on...
ecological classification and integrated resource management. A Forest Research Board, made up of provincial, federal and industry representatives, was created in 1971 to prioritize research needs. The Forest Service was placed under the Ministry of Forests in 1975.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the Ministry of Forests went through several stages of re-structuring, and financial restraints were a major concern. Some of the issues facing the Ministry included timber supply, land use, forest management practices, economic efficiencies, and First Nations. Many of the issues still face the Ministry today, as it continues to forge into the 21st Century and manage the forests of British Columbia.

Today, the BC Forest Service no longer exists under that name, but has been worked into the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (as of March, 2011) and is responsible for 59 million hectares of Crown land, covering two-thirds of the province. It is the steward of the timber, range and recreation resources of all of that land, which is managed for many uses including recreation, forage, timber, and wilderness. It cooperates with other agencies to manage water, fish, wildlife, tourism, heritage, energy and minerals. The forests of British Columbia are some of the most beautiful in the world and the BC Forest Service has done an excellent job over the last 100 years to ensure that the forests will be there for future generations to enjoy.

The BC Forest Service Centenary Society was created in 2008 to help coordinate centenary projects on behalf of the Ministry. The goals of the Society are to capture and document the rich history of the Service so that knowledge may be shared with current and future employees, students and the public. The Centenary Society has many projects on the go to mark the 100th anniversary, including a historical book, DVD, interactive Web site, special events, ceremonies, oral histories, and theme papers. The Centenary Society has also created a wonderful Web site that not only shares information about the events related to the 100th anniversary celebrations, but is also a forum for people to share their stories and memories of the BC Forest Service. Visit www.btrfs100.ca to learn more about the celebrations, share stories and browse through the history of the British Columbia Forest Service. Congratulations to the BCFS and the Centenary Society. Enjoy a year of wonderful celebrations!

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