

Opinion: Public service professionals vital to safeguarding B.C. natural resources

BY SCOTT MCCANNELL, SPECIAL TO THE SUN FEBRUARY 25, 2016

'In the 10 years before the Mt. Polley Mine tailings pond collapse, the Ministry of Energy and Mines had decreased the number of engineers and geologists it employed by 21 per cent. The inspection of tailings ponds was one of the many duties these professionals carried out on behalf of British Columbians.'

In the greater scheme of things, the federal Liberal Party's election campaign promise to appoint a Chief Science Officer (CSO) for Canada was not a pivotal issue, but it was an important shift in mindset, and now that Justin Trudeau's party is in power, it could have significant implications for the government of B.C.

It's no secret that under the Harper government, science and scientists were sidelined. Too many decisions were made without properly considering the data that science provided, and scientists themselves were increasingly muzzled to suppress expert opinions that contradicted official policy.

Although we are still waiting for the new government to appoint a CSO, many scientists across the country who work for the federal government already feel that a weight has been lifted from them. They are optimistic that they will now be given the room not only to do their jobs, but also that their findings and opinions will be appreciated and used to help formulate public policy.

However, at the provincial level, the role of scientists in helping shape and monitor policy remains unclear. Will the new era of open science in Ottawa encourage provincial governments, such as ours here in B.C., to re-evaluate the contribution scientists and other experts can and should make toward the economic prosperity and overall well-being of our province?

We believe it should because for too long now, the B.C. government has been systematically reducing the number of Licensed Science Officers it employs. We have previously warned of the potentially dangerous implications of these cuts. Our report in 2014 showed that between 2009 and 2014 the number of experts and scientists employed by the government dropped by 15 per cent. Nothing has changed since then and the numbers are still far too low for the work that needs to be done.

Every British Columbian should be concerned about this because these are the trained and accredited experts and scientists who help keep us safe. They are foresters, engineers, agrologists, geoscientists, veterinarians, psychologists, physiotherapists and pharmacists. Their role is to provide the provincial government with advice, guidance, research, monitoring and analysis to help ensure the efficient and effective management, utilization and oversight of B.C.'s natural resources, infrastructure, food and water resources and some aspects of health care services.

The Mt. Polley tailings pond disaster is an example of what can happen when these tasks are not done adequately. In the 10 years before the collapse, the Ministry of Energy and Mines had decreased the number of engineers and geologists it employed by 21 per cent. The inspection of tailings ponds was one of the many duties these professionals carried out on behalf of British Columbians.

The tailings pond was inspected only once a year, which the government said was adequate. It failed to heed concerns by local residents and consultants, which, according to its own procedures, should have triggered further investigation. We know the result.

This is an issue affecting not just tailings ponds, but all natural resources in B.C., which are the backbone of our economy. Neglecting their management and monitoring is a threat to the environment and the economy.

Having too few government experts and scientists on staff means that much of the work they were doing has been scaled back, discontinued, contracted out to the private sector or left to self-monitoring by the resource companies themselves. This is not good for B.C.

And we are not the only ones raising the alarm. In a report late last year, the Forest Practices Board said in recent years it has seen situations arise where forestry development was putting local environmental and community values at risk, yet district managers — the experts who should have considerable influence over decisions could do little to affect the development and protect the public interest.

Earlier in the year in the wake of the Mt. Polley investigation findings, the 43,000-member B.C. Wildlife Federation called for the establishment of a Natural Resources Practices Board for B.C. supported by an inter-disciplinary technical staff to provide independent oversight, monitoring, and auditing functions and advice to government, industry and the public in relation to the long-term sustainable management of our natural resources including fish, wildlife, and habitat.

The need to restore a science-based approach to natural resource management in B.C. is clear. With the lead now coming from the new government in Ottawa, we hope that our provincial politicians will see the value.

Scott McCannell is executive director of the Professional Employees Association, a labour union representing 2,500 professionals in B.C.