



TimberLess Times

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SPECIAL EDITION

New report documents highly disruptive effects of Youbou mill closure

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Fractured Lives: Results of the 2003 survey of Youbou Sawmill Workers by Scott Prudham and Rob Penfold

AVAILABLE FOR DOWNLOAD FROM:

www.savebcjobs.com

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www.vipirg.ca

On a misty day in January 2001, TimberWest Forest Corp. permanently closed its Youbou Sawmill on Cowichan Lake leaving over 200 workers without jobs. This act of industrial “restructuring” stunned both the displaced workers, their families, and their forest-dependent community.

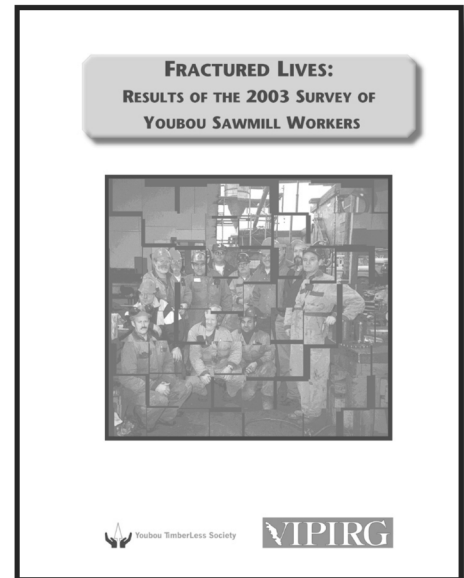
One year later, Deputy Forest Minister **Don Wright** proclaimed: “I understand that an industrial adjustment committee has found alternate employment for 150 of the original 200 displaced Youbou workers.”

This statement just didn’t make sense to the Youbou TimberLess Society (YTS), however. “We knew anecdotally from the membership that the economic situation was still grim,” said YTS President **Keith Dickens**.

Getting at the truth

Two years after the Youbou Sawmill shut down, the YTS collaborated with the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG) to investigate the true human impacts that the mill closure had on the lives of the former millworkers. A questionnaire was developed to gauge the employment and economic status of those who had lost their jobs. “We wanted to find out how they were getting by, and what strategies and programs they had used to adjust in the wake of the mill closure,” said YTS Director **Ken James**. In early 2003, a team of sociology student interns from the University of Victoria conducted the survey, telephoning 100 former Youbou sawmill employees out of the approximately 220 people who worked at the mill when it closed.

Dr. Scott Prudham, an associate professor at the University of Toronto, and **Rob Penfold**, statistically analyzed the collected data and compiled a summary of the findings.



Final report documents social injustice

Prudham and Penfold’s report paints a bleak picture. Jointly released by the YTS and VIPIRG in August 2005, the report serves to document the social injustice of the mill’s closure, said YTS Secretary **Roger Wiles**.

Prudham and Penfold’s results strongly indicate that the closure of the TimberWest sawmill in Youbou had a highly disruptive and largely negative effect on the lives of the people who worked at the mill. For example:

- Over 25% of those surveyed reported that they retired “unwillingly,” meaning that they retired earlier than they desired or earlier than they anticipated. This unwillingness in all probability relates to the workers being unprepared for retirement because it came sooner than they expected.
- Almost one third of those surveyed remained unemployed over 2 years after the mill closed. The survey indicates that many workers who stayed in the area have found

ABOUT THE YTS

The YOUSOU TIMBERLESS SOCIETY is a non-profit volunteer community organization incorporated in the Province of British Columbia. The Society was formed by workers at the Youbou Sawmill during the final days of the mill’s operation under the management of TimberWest Forest Corp. Its purpose is to represent the interests of displaced sawmill workers and forest-dependent communities.

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permanent, full-time forest sector work difficult to find. Besides the loss of the Youbou mill, many other wood products facilities have either closed or seen their employment levels reduced in recent years coinciding with broad industry restructuring and decline.

- Of the 40% of the former workers employed or self-employed at the time of the survey, most experienced decreases in wages, benefits, and in levels of job security and job satisfaction. This is highly significant, but not unexpected given that the mill was unionized and provided a source of relatively high-paying jobs. Such jobs are not abundant in the Cowichan Lake area, which has become increasingly characterized by service sector employment.
- Fully two thirds of those surveyed made no use of the job training or placement programs available to assist workers in adjusting to the mill closure and to finding new work. Anecdotal information offered by the former mill workers indicates that many avoided using the TimberWest assistance program specifically because it was run by the company. This program, which was staffed by former members of the Youbou mill's management, was seen as a somewhat empty and cynical attempt by TimberWest to improve its public image in the wake of the closure by appearing to do something for the workers. Any claim by the company that this program offset the effects of the mill closure in any meaningful way is clearly not supported by the survey results.

Lasting effects of mill closure

Prudham and Penfold strongly suggest that the Youbou mill's closure had disruptive effects not only on workers themselves, but also on worker families and households, with lasting impacts on life histories of those involved. Specifically, one half (49 of 99) of those surveyed were the sole income earner in their households 2 years after the mill closed. Of these, 12 people were both a sole income earner in their household and were also unemployed.

The authors maintain that these findings are consistent with research that has been conducted on the effects of mill closures and industrial restructuring on workers and associated communities throughout the forest products manufacturing region of western North America over the last 20 years. Their statistical analysis also reinforces graduate research conducted by **Jan Whitehead** in the Cowichan Lake region following the Youbou sawmill closure ("Assisting Resource Workers in the Cowichan Lake Region to Cope with Unemployment and to Build Resiliency," Masters Thesis-2003, Leadership and Training, Royal Roads University, Victoria, B.C.).

Findings underscore forest policy concerns

Based on their results, Prudham and Penfold underscore the following concerns:

"This report publicly validates the experience for over 200 former workers—many of whom are still struggling emotionally, psychologically, and financially more than four years after the Youbou mill's closure."

- Any provincial forest policy that places the flexibility and freedom of forest companies over the security of workers will continue to undermine the economic viability of forest-based communities. Through appurtenancy clauses in Tree Farm Licences, the Government previously had the means to protect jobs by making local milling operations a condition of licence retention. The Government has now phased out appurtenancy clauses altogether. This is a mistake. The Province should continue to make accountability to communities and commitments to sustainable employment conditions of access to public lands and harvest rights.
- The Government should take steps to develop and implement forest policy that aims to achieve the highest possible level of sustainable employment and income for communities while ensuring no long-term degradation of provincial forest resources or the environment. This should include more alternatives to business-as-usual forest tenures, including stronger and more ambitious support of community forestry. It should also include emphasis on the manufacture of value-added forest products.
- The Government should improve the quality of worker re-training and placement programs. Specifically, these programs should not be operated by companies ostensibly in the service of their own former employees. While companies that close mills can and should be expected to contribute to funding these programs, the programs should be operated by government or independent agencies, and should be staffed by individuals trained and experienced in worker placement and re-training.

Report "significant milestone" for YTS

The YTS Executive heralded the release of Prudham and Penfold's report as a significant milestone for the YTS. "It publicly validates the experience for over 200 former workers—many of whom are still struggling emotionally, psychologically, and financially more than four years after the Youbou mill's closure," said Dickens. "We hope this report will educate and inform politicians, public policy makers, business decision makers, and community leaders. We know that the Youbou workers understand in a very personal way, the true cost of government negligence and poor ethics in business."