

AUDIT AT A GLANCE

MANAGEMENT OF FOREST SERVICE ROADS

Why we did this audit

- There are 58,000 km of forest service roads (FSRs) in B.C. on Crown land built to access timber for forestry operations
- While not built or maintained for public use, FSRs are also used for other commercial purposes and by communities and recreational users, so safety is important
- FSRs are an important part of B.C.'s transportation systems and help keep the province connected, including linking First Nations and remote communities to towns and cities
- If not adequately maintained, FSRs can impact the environment

Objective

To determine whether the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development managed safety and environmental risks on FSRs in accordance with policy

Audit period: January 2016 to June 2019

Conclusion

- The ministry did not manage safety and environmental risks on FSRs as required by its policies
- The shortcomings in maintenance work and lack of reliable information increase risks to road users and to the environment

The ministry has accepted all 9 recommendations we made focused on asking it to review its policies and practices so that it can meet its own expectations for inspecting and maintaining FSRs.

What we found

Identifying and assessing risks on FSRs

Inventory information on FSRs inconsistent and difficult to share

- Inconsistent information between systems—hard to know if inventories complete/up to date
- BC Timber Sales lacked ready access to information on whether road use permit holders responsible for maintenance

RECOMMENDATION 1

Inspection/maintenance policy requirements not aligned

- FSRs managed by districts—Engineering Manual and Funding Policy contradictory
- Engineering Manual requires more frequent inspections for some risk categories

RECOMMENDATION 3

Districts lacked consistent or complete inspection records

- Sampled 8 of 23 districts—records didn't show if FSRs inspected per policy
- No standard/required processes or system for tracking inspections

RECOMMENDATIONS 4, 5

BC Timber Sales not inspecting as required and data unreliable

- System data showed ~40% of BC Timber Sales roads not inspected at required frequency
- Ministry data was inaccurate, so extent of inspection deficiency was unclear

RECOMMENDATIONS 7, 8

87% of bridges and major culverts inspected

- Past decade—5,789 of 6,640 bridges/culverts inspected at required frequency
- 851 not inspected—mostly bridges on active crossings
- As of May 2019, 340 overdue for inspection, by average of 635 days

RECOMMENDATION 2



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Mitigating risks on FSRs

Districts not keeping consistent or complete maintenance records

- We reviewed records from 8/23 districts
- Unknown if maintenance work met policy timelines, as records incomplete
- 2 districts had no maintenance records

RECOMMENDATIONS 4, 5

Districts not maintaining roads as required by policy

- From 2017/18 to 2019/20, districts received between 14% and 20% of their total budget requests for FSR maintenance
- In 2019/20, districts received 26% of their requests for maintenance on priority FSRs (e.g., providing access to communities)
- Unfunded work included almost \$9M in high-priority maintenance/repairs

RECOMMENDATION 6

BC Timber Sales lacked reliable data on maintenance

- System data and local records didn't provide accurate information on maintenance to determine if policy was met
- System data showed that BC Timber Sales completed 43% of its planned maintenance
- System data was inaccurate, and system used by only 10 of 12 business areas because not mandatory

RECOMMENDATIONS 7, 8

High-priority repairs overdue on 48% of bridges and major culverts

- 3,178 of 6,640 structures—high-priority repairs overdue by over 2 years on average
- 1,734 structures—repairs outstanding for 2 inspection cycles
- 583 structures— replacement overdue by 5 years on average
- Load ratings reduced on 585 structures to reduce safety risks
- In 2019/20, \$2.7M of districts' requests for high-risk bridge and culvert repairs/replacements unfunded

RECOMMENDATION 2

Ministry oversight of FSRs under road use permit limited

- No requirements for districts to monitor maintenance done by road use permit holders; limited authority to order maintenance
- Road use permit holders expected to self-monitor, yet ongoing challenges to ensure adequate maintenance of FSRs under permit
- Ministry indicated limited oversight due in part to unclear roles and responsibilities (districts and Compliance and Enforcement Branch)

RECOMMENDATION 9

Ministry deactivated FSRs based on risk, but faces pressure to keep them open

- Districts and BC Timber Sales deactivate FSRs no longer needed for industrial use, according to risk
- Since 2016/17, districts deactivated 116 km, BC Timber Sales 529 km
- Pressure from non-industrial users (e.g., communities) to keep FSRs open increasing ongoing maintenance costs

RECOMMENDATION 6

After reading this report, you may want to consider asking the following questions of government:

1. How will the government prioritize investing more money in maintenance for FSRs given the shortfalls that were identified?
2. How will the ministry balance public expectations to keep FSRs safe for public use, with a mandate that does not require it do so?
3. How will the ministry assess which roads to deactivate to reduce maintenance costs, safety risks and environmental impacts when pressure exists to keep them open?