

Forestry towns on the hook

By Neil Horner - Parksville Qualicum Beach News - January 22, 2008

NDP MLA Fraser says selloff of forest lands in B.C. could hurt resource towns

The selloff of private forest lands in B.C. could lead to local communities holding the bag, said Alberni-Qualicum MLA Scott Fraser.

That bag, he added, should be being held by the provincial government.

"This week, we saw public outrage over the potential for old growth logging in Cameron Canyon," Fraser said. "In Port Alberni, there was great public concern about a mudslide, suspected to have been caused by nearby logging."

In both cases, Fraser said, the provincial government is to blame for changing the law and removing the lands from a Tree Farm Licence (TFL). This, he said, eliminated public oversight and reduced environmental protection.

"They did it without consulting communities, who are left to deal with the aftermath," Fraser added.

In 2004, the Ministry of Forests authorized the removal of 70,300 hectares of private lands from Tree Farm Licence 44.

The lands were then sold to Island Timberlands in 2005, which recently spun off its timber assets to an offshore operation in Bermuda.

"What happens if the company is found liable for damages to civic assets like the Port Alberni watershed?" Fraser asked. "Would they be exempt from civil suit, now that their operations are offshore?"

A spokesman for Island Timberlands last week stressed his company has no plans to log the Cameron River Canyon.

Meanwhile this week, Premier Gordon Campbell announced the province will appoint a working roundtable on forestry to conduct a review of the government's forest regulations and provide new financial support for forestry workers.

Campbell made the announcement at the Truck Loggers Association convention in Vancouver.

The roundtable will undertake an exhaustive review of all facets of the forest industry and report quarterly to cabinet.

"Forestry in British Columbia is a critically important industry, creating jobs and driving the economies in communities across the province," Campbell said.

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