

Chief sees forest beyond ravaged trees

Native leaders conference to join efforts to address devastation caused by beetles



By MARK HUME

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VANCOUVER -- When Chief Stewart Phillip drove across British Columbia this summer, making a diagonal crossing from northeast to southwest, he was shocked by the forest devastation he saw.

"You see it on television but you're not prepared for the scope of it," he said of the mountain pine beetle infestation, which has affected about seven million hectares so far in the province and is continuing to spread.

The impact is highly visible because a tree's pine needles turn red after a beetle attack.

"Driving through that area in daylight and seeing the extent of it, it was devastating. It rips the bottom of your stomach out," said Chief Phillip, president of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

Later this month he and other native leaders, including representatives for more than 80 native bands, will hold an emergency conference to discuss the pine beetle epidemic. The focus will be how their communities might assist crisis-management efforts launched by the province, with \$100-million in federal funding and \$30-million from British Columbia.

Although government and business leaders have held similar conferences in the past, this is the first time natives have started an initiative on the problem.

"We're not going to stand by and watch the province and the government of Canada and industry develop solutions without the involvement of first nations," Chief Phillip said.

"This epidemic is having a devastating impact on the forests that first nations depend on, not just economically but culturally as well," he said.

The mountain pine beetle kills the trees it infests, but it does not immediately destroy the wood, which can be salvaged for several years after the tree dies.

Chief Phillip said that throughout Northern British Columbia, where the infestation is at its worst, there are increasing demands to log the beetle-damaged forests before the wood is lost.

He said that has created a "gold rush" mentality that worries native bands.

"It goes from horizon to horizon," he said of the pine beetle infestation. "Knowing that wood all has to come out and thinking about the impact that could have on the land and the watersheds, obviously there are [environmental] concerns."

He said the conference, which will be held in Prince George, will focus on both the concerns of native bands and the economic opportunities the infestation presents.

He said native communities throughout the province want to be part of logging and replanting operations and that a new relationship between government and native bands makes that possible.

"I think the door is open very wide to first nations," Chief Phillip said. "Four years ago we faced [a] hostile political atmosphere, but there's been a remarkable change here in British Columbia and there is a lot of talk about the new relationship."

Chief Robert Charlie of the Burns Lake Indian Band said his community is surrounded by dead and dying forests.

"It's a natural disaster that you don't expect to see in your lifetime," Chief Charlie said. "It's a mega-disaster that's going to cause mega-problems, not just for first nations, but for everyone in this province. It's kinda scary and it's starting to create uncertainty about the future."

Forest and Range Minister Rich Coleman said the government wants to see natives engaged in the problem.

He said government is approaching the situation "not from the forestry perspective but more like an emergency-management perspective," and is putting in place a team to work with natives, industry and communities.

"We'll find ways to have them involved," Mr. Coleman said of the natives.

He said the first challenge is to get out the timber that can be salvaged. But at the same time, planners have to consider that at some point there will be a reduction in timber supply.

"It's probably a 10-year plan that we'll roll out. The objective at the front end will be to flat-line the fibre-supply issue so that we can then actually have some healthy forests left after we've harvested as much as the beetle kill as we can," Mr. Coleman said.

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