

MLA calls for beetle fund facts details

By Joyanne Pursaga
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The B.C. Liberals need to reveal exactly where the \$100 million the federal government kicked in this spring for the mountain pine beetle crisis will be spent, demanded the Opposition last week.

An NDP press release said at least some of the cash must be spent on a Pine Beetle Investment Fund for beetle-affected communities like Quesnel.

But for now, Forest and Range critic Bob Simpson's line of questioning revolves around the fund's use.

"The bottom line is, where is the money, has it actually been transferred and, if so, what is it's use?" asked Simpson Monday. "The public deserves an accounting of that money."

Simpson also blames federal reluctance to provide more of the \$1 billion B.C. requested to cope with the problem over the next 10 years on the province's lack of a beetle strategy.

Meanwhile, community groups like the Cariboo Chilcotin Beetle Action Coalition, are expected to conduct extensive research and business plans to secure provincial funds, said the Cariboo North MLA.

"There's a certain irony in this, in that these groups have to do sophisticated planning to get money from the province. And yet the province thinks it can just go to the federal government and say, 'give us the money,'" said Simpson.

The critic says he's heard the money could either be part of a \$140 million general beetle fund to help both B.C. and Alberta, pay for a three-year B.C.-only action plan or be used to further mountain pine beetle research.

Simpson says he wrote three letters, one each to Forests and Range Minister Rich Coleman, Government House Leader Mike de Jong, and Minister of Industry Canada David Emerson, to inquire about the status of the money.

But he says he didn't receive a single detailed response.

"Here we have \$100 million that we can't track down," said Simpson. "We don't know where it is, what it's being used for, if anything."

But Coleman says an implementation plan is already in the works.

"We're developing a comprehensive business plan for the money to ensure it goes to priority areas, such as investment funds for communities," said Coleman, citing community groups in the Cariboo, Vanderhoof and the Okanagan.

The government also increased annual allowable cut levels to harvest beetle wood, including a 3.5 million cubic metre uplift in the Quesnel forest district.

The ministry detected about 3.86 million hectares of mountain pine beetle attack in the Cariboo in 2004 and about 7 million cubic metres across the province.

And he says the NDP push for a non-partisan special committee to deal with the epidemic would simply repeat work the Premier's Advisory Committee on the Mountain Pine Beetle completed in 2001.

He says Mayor Nate Bello agrees there is no need for another legislative committee to address the problem.

"That stuff has all been done. Let's get on with some implementation," said Coleman. But he says action needs to go beyond a simple mountain pine beetle trust.

"At this stage, none of the communities think a trust fund is the only solution," said Coleman.

He says other strategies, such as increasing the diversity of forest species, must also be addressed to keep forests sustainable.

Coleman did not release the date of when the government's pine beetle plan will be completed.

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