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Tory leader pledges beetle aid

by GORDON HOEKSTRA Citizen staff

Opposition leader Stephen Harper announced Monday a Conservative government would commit to B.C.'s request for \$1 billion in help over the next 10 years to deal with the impact of the mountain pine beetle epidemic.

B.C. has been asking Ottawa for the past two years for a long-term aid package to deal with the epidemic, the largest of its kind ever in Canada.

Earlier this year the federal Liberals pledged \$100 million for this fiscal year, but it's not enough and too slow in coming, Harper told reporters at Prince George Airport.

"We believe this is a national crisis which calls for concerted national action," Harper said after viewing the mountain pine beetle epidemic first hand during a helicopter flight.

"That sea of red quite frankly symbolizes enormous damage and threat that is going to happen to tens of thousands of families," added Harper, referring to his fly-over of the epidemic. The needles of the lodgepole pine turn red after they have been killed by the beetles.

The major investment -- which has been accounted for in the party's rolling budget and next platform -- will help to control the beetle, salvage damaged trees faster, assist communities directly affected by the epidemic and research better ways of managing the destructive pest, said Harper.

Any failure to implement the \$1-billion action plan proposed by B.C. could have a devastating impact on the future of forestry in this province, and, perhaps across the country, said Harper.

The northern B.C. forest industry had been calling on Ottawa for a long-term aid package for four years, originally asking for \$500 million. That figure has risen as the epidemic has expanded.

The infestation now covers seven million hectares in north and central B.C., an area the size of New Brunswick. By the time it runs its course in 2013, 80 per cent of the Interior's pine is expected to be dead.

Doug Routledge, northern vice-president of B.C.'s Council of Forest Industries, said it's no secret that B.C. government and forest industry have been calling for more federal involvement in the epidemic. "From that point of view (Harper's) announcement is welcome," said Routledge, who hosted Harper on the helicopter flight.

Williams Lake Mayor Rick Gibson, who drove to Prince George to meet with Harper, also said the pledge to fully fund B.C.'s beetle action plan was welcome should the Conservatives form

government. He said the national recognition of the issue is also exciting. However, he stressed the epidemic is not a political issue, but a community one.

"We've all got to row in the same direction," said Gibson, who is a member of the Cariboo-Chilcotin Beetle Action Coalition.

Asked why it had taken so long for him to view the epidemic first hand when the call for funding came four years ago, Harper said Cariboo-Prince George MP Dick Harris, Prince George-Peace River MP Jay Hill and the party had voiced their concern for some time.

Harper said as the crisis has worsened, the urgency has increased, and it seemed an ideal time to make his party's platform clear. "We're getting close to an election, and hopefully this will spur the prime minister and the government into some kind of action," said Harper.

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