

Alberta communities that depend on forestry call for pine beetle action plan

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Alberta communities that depend on the forest industry are calling for a long-term plan to help them cope with devastation caused by the voracious mountain pine beetle.

The tiny bugs, which have already killed nine million hectares of timber in British Columbia, now infect more than three million trees in Alberta and continue to spread.

A report by the Grande Alberta Economic Region says communities such as Hinton, Edson, Grande Cache, Drayton Valley, Whitecourt and even Jasper could be hit hard by the fallout.

"Entire communities can become at risk in a variety of ways," says the report.

"It is recommended that the government of Alberta consider the impact of the mountain pine beetle as both an emergency and a special case."

The report warns that if the beetles continue to spread, huge swaths of dead timber will hurt the forest and tourism industries. People could lose their jobs and spark an economic downturn.

Millions of dried-out, dead and dying trees could also pose a serious forest-fire threat.

Hinton Mayor Glenn Taylor, chairman of the region, said while it may take years for the beetles to fully wreak their havoc, the time for action is now.

"Without proper planning a number of forest-dependent communities in this region could be hit hard," Taylor said. "Jobs could be lost and there could be economic slowdowns."

"The province must ensure that forested lands are managed in such a way as to reduce the chances that fires in pine-beetle infested wood will threaten communities."

The report, which includes the views of scientists, industry experts and everyday people from throughout the sprawling area west of Edmonton, calls on the government to help diversify the region's economy.

It recommends that the province should create a special pine beetle sustainability fund that would pay for programs to help communities adapt to the beetle scourge.

Taylor said while the Alberta government is working hard to help forestry companies deal with the impact of the beetle, communities want to ensure that their concerns are considered as well.

People in the Grande Prairie area and along the eastern foothills of the Rockies are also growing concerned about the beetles, he said.

The Grande Alberta Economic Region presented its report on Monday to the provincial government.

The province has been working with the region and already has a committee studying the threat posed by the beetles, said Duncan MacDonell, a spokesman for the Sustainable Resources Development Department.

A report from the government-appointed committee, which includes the mayors of Crowsnest Pass and Whitecourt, is to be presented to Minister Ted Morton this summer.

"We have been looking at the very same issues and looking at the very same options," MacDonell said.

Scientists consider the pine beetle situation to be one of the largest insect epidemics in North American history.

The beetle population began to explode in B.C. around 1993, buoyed in part by a series of hot, dry summers and mild winters.

The bugs kill by laying their eggs in the wood, infecting pine trees with a fungus that starves them of water and nutrients. The beetles spread in the summer, riding wind currents east across the mountains.

The Grande Alberta region's call for action is timely and prudent, said Donna Barnett, mayor of the town of 100 Mile House in the central interior of B.C.

Barnett said communities in the Cariboo-Chilcotin region can already see the tell-tale red-coloured swaths of timber that have been ravaged by beetles.

A coalition of communities in the area is asking the B.C. and federal governments for \$500 million over 10 years to deal with the economic fallout from the infestation.

"If you don't act now and plan now - when the devastation does hit your communities it will hit hard," said Barnett, who is also chairwoman of the Cariboo-Chilcotin Beetle Action Coalition.

"You will have high unemployment, loss of tax base. People could lose their homes. You could turn into a boom and bust town."