

## Beetles give certainty

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If there is any good news on the mountain pine beetle front, it's that we're probably about halfway through. According to the province's recent pine beetle update, it is estimated that the epidemic will have killed 530 million cubic metres of pine by 2007. This represents approximately 40 per cent of the merchantable pine volume (1.35 billion cubic metres) and 12 per cent of the total provincial merchantable volume on the timber harvesting land base (4.6 billion cubic metres). The amount killed by the pine beetle is projected to increase to over one billion cubic metres by 2015. The figures are staggering. Of that there is no doubt. The good news for the Prince George area is that the bulk of the attack rolled through this area in 2005. The pine beetle, while still killing trees, is killing fewer trees per year than it did a couple of years ago.

One of the ways we have tried to combat the infestation, and to deal with the aftermath, is to elevate cut levels in areas hit by the beetle. The question that only time will answer is: How long will stands remain merchantable after being killed by the pine beetle?

How long stands actually do remain merchantable relies on several factors that are specific to each stand. How dry is it? How wet is it? The list goes on.

What we do know is that at some point in time, the dead trees no longer become merchantable. We have to be ready for that eventuality.

The pine beetle update, recently released by the provincial government, suggests that timber supply could start declining, in some areas, within four to five years.

“The length of time the short-term timber supply could be maintained is highly dependent on shelf-life, which is subject to uncertainty,” states the report. “Shelf-life is a function of many variables including climate, markets, technology and the ability to develop new products in which dead pine can be utilized. There is enough dead volume in high-affected areas to maintain uplifts longer if dead volumes can be utilized for longer than assumed in the analysis.”

The message here is simple: Cut levels are elevated now, they won't stay that way unless we find ways to utilize beetle-killed wood other than for saw-logs. In other words, don't base the economy on temporarily elevated cut levels. It's tough, to use a poor cliché, to see the forest for the trees. The elevated cuts levels have meant a lot more work in the bush for a lot of people. We have to realize that those cut levels won't last and prepare for the inevitable decline.

Here in Prince George we are probably better poised to deal with decreased cut levels than other cities in the North, particularly one-industry towns. We have undergone a concerted effort to diversify our economy and many of those efforts are starting to pay off. The North is also a leader in innovative technologies and ideas that use beetle-killed wood. Even so, we have to be aware that a few years out we will experience a decrease in cut levels. That will have an impact. For some communities it will be a large impact. Thanks to the work that is being done now, and will continue to be done in Prince George, it won't be as big a blow as it could have been.

Business planning is all about certainty. We hear that all the time. It's easier to plan when you know what the future holds. In respect to the mountain pine beetle infestation and cut levels, we know what's coming. Let's plan for it.