



Mayor to fight beetles in Alberta

By Paul Carlucci
Free Press Staff

July 11, 2007

There's no teacher quite like experience, and Alberta knows it.

A mountain pine beetle conference is scheduled for July 23-25, and 100 Mile Mayor Donna Barnett has been invited to participate in a comparative panel about the beetle scourge on either side of the provincial border.

Where we went wrong was that we never started to mitigate the problem in the 90s, when we should have, the mayor said. We still would have the pine beetle, but we believe if we had mitigation such as there is in Alberta, probably we could have stopped it.

Adding that the beetle can't be fully wiped out, Barnett said much of the damage could have been avoided if the forests were better managed. Perhaps a cold winter could have come along to crush the infestation.

Who knows?, she asked. But so many trees are dead. They won't come back.

In Alberta, strategic cutting is under way in places like Jasper and Banff with the aim to stop the beetle's invasive spread. In Grand Prairie, a hotline has been set-up for the public to notify forestry officials of potentially afflicted trees on private property. Response times for that initiative are same-day.

This kind of information-sharing embodies a collaborative approach favoured by the Green Party of British Columbia. President Christopher Bennett has called on the Gordon Campbell Liberals to host a bipartisan pine beetle summit, complete with a slate of relevant experts.

I think we're nearing a crisis situation with the pine beetle, he said. The bug is evolving. What we know about the beetle right now is that it's now finding its way onto weaker spruce trees, as well. Imagine if this continues at the same scale as it was on the pine trees. The summit is our way of saying we don't want to attack the government on this.

As of yet, there's been no response from the Liberals. The Green Party plans to push for a summit throughout July, but it will consider another strategy if it doesn't get results. Part of the strategy, said Bennett, could be reaching out to jurisdictions like the District of 100 Mile.

In further developments related to the pine beetle, the Joint Adjustment Committee (JAC) of the Cariboo-Chilcotin Beetle Action Coalition (CCBAC) is preparing a July survey of forestry workers. The intent is to survey loggers, mill workers, suppliers and truckers on their post-industry plans, as the boom in logging beetle-ravaged stock is unsustainable.

Initially, JAC chair David Zirnhelt was hoping to conduct the survey using confidential employee listings voluntarily divulged by companies. The aim was to survey 3,500 people out of the 8-10,000 workers in the region. But only 2,000 had been reached.

We want to be representative, Zirnhelt said. So we've come up with another strategy, which would be to survey the general population.

JAC knows that 20 per cent of people in the region work in forestry. The plan, then, is to phone the public, with every one in five calls reaching a forestry worker.

Still, Zirnhelt would like employers to volunteer lists as the month goes on. There hasn't been resistance, he said, but the timing has been tricky.

The survey explores a number of areas. Do workers plan on leaving the region when the boom dies off? Have they considered alternate employment? Do they need help exploring their options? Do they need job-training?

Employers wishing to contact Zirnhelt can reach him at (250)-243-2243.