

Communities will need to find ways to adapt

By Arthur Williams
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After approximately one year of operations, the Omineca Beetle Action Coalition (OBAC) is beginning to take action to help the regional address the challenges posed by the mountain pine beetle epidemic.

Last year was an organizing year for OBAC, manager Elizabeth Andersen said. The organization set up basic operational policies; conducted community discussion sessions; set up an office and website; built partnerships, registered as a society; established a planning framework; and welcomed McBride, Valemount and Mackenzie as new members, Andersen said.

"Believing in a bright future right now is challenging. [But] it's difficult getting the attention of people and community groups because they're busy," she said.

OBAC's mandate is to gather and share credible information about the beetle situation; communicate community interests to government and industry; develop and promote solutions to decision makers; and influence industry and government policies to support the aims of the community.

Communities will need to find ways to adapt to, "beetle-induced change," Andersen said.

"The mountain pine beetle is a bit of a starting gun going off," she added.

OBAC has set out 11 priority areas, based on the public consultation conducted last year.

Those priorities include promoting community-based interest in future forests and fibre use; mineral and energy exploration; alternative energy; attracting the transportation industry; worker retention and attraction programs; social and community services and supports; tourism; agriculture; regional branding; and regional emergency response services. OBAC will be starting initiatives on the first five areas this year.

"[OBAC] is going to be built from the ground up as much as possible," Andersen said.

The organization has also created an online database of land use plans in the region.

"Instead of having to work their way through a 250-page document, or several 250-page documents, they just circle an area they're interested in and it shows all the relevant information," Andersen explained. "One of the barriers to industry is people say they can't understand land use plans. We want to make sure there are no barriers to investment in our area."

For more information, go online to <http://ominecacoalition.ca>.