

Britneff: Old growth logging unsustainable

CBYG, Wednesday, October 10, 2012 07:50

By CBC Daybreak North

Andrew Kurjata: The BC government says it is opening the door to the idea of logging old-growth forests to help boost timber supply. Forests Minister Steve Thomson insists any decision to cut would be based on science and would only be done if consensus was reached from all members of the community. As many as eight sawmills face closure as the timber supply grows thin. Examining the old-growth potential in central BC is just one of several actions the province plans to take.

For reaction to the government's plans we have reached Anthony Britneff. He is a retired professional forester who spent 40 years with the BC forest service, where he held a number of senior positions. He is still a registered professional forester in Victoria, where we have reached him at his home this morning.

Good morning.

Anthony Britneff: Good morning, Andrew.

Kurjata: What do you make of the idea of opening the province's old-growth forests to logging?

Britneff: Well, science-based logging of old-growth forests is just smoke and mirrors. It's mumbo-jumbo. What it is, is a justification for continued environmental destruction and more unsustainable logging.

No scientist is going to recommend the ruination of ecosystem integrity against one of the Montreal Process's key criteria for sustainable management. You know, I'll tell you what the science of ecology and conservation biology is already saying. They're saying more than, I think, somewhere around 1,900, 43%, of BC's 4,000 -- somewhere over 4,300, somewhere around there -- species are at risk of extinction and extirpation. They're also saying we need more forests reserved as corridors between ecosystems and as shelter and habitat for animals, and they're saying we need a better conservation framework. That's what the science is already telling us.

Kurjata: So you don't think that this is a good decision. Do you trust or do you believe that the government will do as it says and only go into these areas if it is scientifically sound?

Britneff: No, quite frankly, I don't trust this government. Its record on sustainable forest management is terrible. I find this action plan.... For a start, it's not an action plan by any commonly accepted definition. It contains no firm commitments, no goals and targets. It has no time lines, and it has no estimated costs. In fact, one must keep in mind that in the ministry's service plan this year it states very clearly that the stewardship budget will be cut by \$40 million next year.

You know, so do I trust this government and this action plan? No.

Kurjata: We have heard the risks associated with not taking action, including the loss of mills and jobs. Do you see a way that those can be preserved while still maintaining the sustainable forests?

Britneff: For a start, we're not maintaining sustainable forestry in this province.

Secondly, yes, and that was pointed out by the owners of the Burns Lake mill during the special committee on timber supply hearings. Ironically, [Hampton Affiliates], the owners, were pleading with the committee to recommend that the chief forester halve the AAC in the Lakes TSA. Now, if that isn't an implicit condemnation of a policy of over-

cutting in this province, I don't know what is. They're saying halve it right now so that we can sustain a decent level of timber supply in the mid-term for our communities and the next generation.

Kurjata: So you're saying we need to curb the amount of logging and harvesting that's being done right now.

Britneff: Well, I wasn't saying that, I was pointing out that one of the industry players was saying that, and yes, I would agree with them.

Kurjata: What would this mean for things like sawmill reconstruction in Burns Lake or in Prince George? Two mills in the Prince George area are currently not operating, Prince George Lakeland Mills and Burns Lake. If we were to do as the industry asked for, as you said, and halve the amount of harvesting that's going on, what would that mean for the chances of these mills being rebuilt?

Britneff: The answer I have to that one is I don't know, but what I do know is that you don't make these types of decisions without having a reliable and current inventory in place. This is one of the critical factors of credibility at issue here. That is that the government does not have a current and reliable inventory on which to base timber supply and other management decisions related to sensitive areas, forest reserves and marginally economic forests, which are all dealt with in this so-called action plan. It gives absolutely no assurance or commitment to sufficient funding for inventory as recommended by the committee. According to the ministry's own state-of-the-forests report, the ministry has already told us that 74% of forest inventories for all of the management units -- that's TSAs and TFLs -- are 25 years old or greater.

Kurjata: So if you were able to give this government one action item that they need to do right now, one priority, what would that be?

Britneff: The top priority is get on with inventory and fund it, if you just want one. The second, if I may be so bold as to offer a second, is to get on with reforestation of NSR areas.

Kurjata: Is there time to do this?

Britneff: Well, certainly, there's time, but forestry is a long-term activity. We don't do things overnight. The destruction of forest management, the evisceration of the forest service and the cutting back by over 1,000 jobs: all of this has stripped not only the forest service of the capacity to manage our forests sustainably but also a large part of the forestry consulting industry. You just don't turn things around overnight, and that is why one needs a good, solid plan, as pointed out by the auditor general.

Kurjata: All right, Anthony, I'm afraid we are out of time. [xrz]