

# Pine beetle runs out of food, B.C. mills to run out of wood

## Industry eyes protected areas

BY GORDON HAMILTON, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 22, 2009



Red (dead) trees infested with the mountain pine beetle dispersed with green trees.

Photograph by: ., Ministry of Forests

The mountain pine beetle epidemic is over, B.C.'s forests minister declared Monday.

But it's not because the beetles have been defeated. Rather, they have run out of trees, and that heralds a whole new set of problems, Pat Bell told the Vancouver Board of Trade.

The beetles have turned the province's timber supply expectations upside down. Forest companies that are running out of wood are eyeing healthy stands — including old-growth forest — in protected areas, while Bell is warning that eight to 12 sawmills could close permanently if other sources of timber are not found.

"The mountain pine beetle epidemic is largely over," Bell told the board of trade. "The bad news is that it's because they don't have any food left to eat. The vast majority of our pine stands have been killed at this point, and we are really in a salvage mode."

Except for a few isolated areas in the Kootenays and in the northeast of the province, he said the

beetle population is now on the decline, having killed an estimated 24 per cent of the province's current timber harvest.

"If we don't do anything, mills will close," Bell said in an interview later.

"Right now, if it was status quo, we are looking at a [harvest reduction] provincewide of about 12 million cubic metres a year. Depending on the size of the mill, that's eight to 12 mills."

He said previous forest ministers never had to worry about running out of trees, but the beetle ended the myth that the supply was inexhaustible.

"As a result of the mountain pine beetles and decisions that have been made around species-at-risk recovery strategies and land-use planning, there is a very real possibility that we will run out of trees," he said.

Bell said the forests ministry is aggressively pursuing new silviculture practices and techniques that will increase the province's timber supply to mitigate the economic damage caused by the beetle. He believes that could reduce the beetle's impact on the annual timber harvest to seven per cent.

Keta Kosman, publisher of Madison's Lumber Reporter, said in an interview the immediate issue facing some sawmills is the fact that they are starting to run out of wood already.

Kosman said there is only a year and a half's supply of wood remaining that's close to the mills and economic to harvest.

At the other end of the spectrum, timber can be available for five to 15 years for mills that can economically access the dead pine.

For those mills with a quickly shrinking supply, opening up access to timber locked up in land-use plans is an option the province needs to address, an industry spokesman said.

"All of the values of the landscape need to share equally in the damage the mountain pine beetle has done," Council of Forest Industries vice-president Doug Routledge said in a separate interview from Prince George.

He said if timber remains locked up because of land use plans that protect old-growth forests and other "values," the impact of the beetle on the forest industry will be magnified.

Routledge said companies have already employed new technology to increase lumber recoveries from beetle-damaged wood they have been harvesting as part of a strategy to contain the infestation. They are now entering what he called the "second wave" of adapting to the beetle by moving into new sources of timber.

Canfor's decision to reopen its Mackenzie sawmill, which has a relatively unscathed timber supply is an example, Routledge said. Access to timber locked up in land-use plans is another potential source of wood.

He acknowledged it is a "big ticket item," but that resource communities need to address it. It is the only solution, short of a turnaround in the U.S. housing market, he said.

Bell was not available to comment on the industry proposal to reopen land-use plans.

However, Valerie Langer of ForestEthics said the environment should not have to pay for the loss of sawmill logs to the beetle.

"I am flabbergasted," Langer said in an interview. "I can't believe they would suggest such a thing. We have less than what is necessary in protected areas now. The industry's problems should not be borne at the expense of the environment."

The ministry of forests and range estimates that the mountain pine beetle has now killed 620 million cubic metres of timber, the equivalent of 620 million telephone poles. More than 14.5 million hectares, an area more than four times the size of Vancouver Island, have been hit.

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