

Forget the trees.

This is really about land



More than 50 members of the Port Hardy-area Kwakiutl band made the seven-hour drive to Victoria, where they were joined by 50 others for yesterday's demonstration at the legislature.

Photograph by : John McKay, Times Colonist

Jack Knox, Times Colonist

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Maybe it's time to stop playing nice, the crowd was told yesterday as the wood smoke rose to the roof of Victoria's Mungo Martin big house. Maybe it's time to drop the gentlemen's agreement to exclude established communities from land claims. Maybe, said Kwakiutl band elder Basil Ambers, decked out in a traditional button blanket, it's time to include places like Port Hardy and Port McNeill.

More than 50 members of the Port Hardy-area band made the seven-hour drive to Victoria, where they were joined by 50 others in a demonstration at the legislature. They're angry about what they say is a lack of meaningful consultation over the provincial government's decision to remove 28,000 hectares of Western Forest Products' private land from tree farm licences on Vancouver Island.

The band says that includes 1,400 hectares in its Douglas Treaty area, property that could potentially form part of a land-claims settlement. If it is sold and logged off, a conceivable outcome once freed from the licence's land-use restrictions, that window is closed.

The band says it plans legal action to try to block the removal.

Which brings us to a point that has quietly been sliding past many Victorians: Forest companies are discovering that land, not trees, is sometimes where the money is. That's particularly true on the south Island, where it might make sense to log land, then sell it for development.

A debt-heavy outfit like Western must be eyeing property like the 12,000 hectares removed from TFL 25 near Jordan River.

"We are not developers," replies Gary Ley, speaking for Western. The company's private lands comprise only a small portion of its Vancouver Island holdings. The Island is where most of Western's mills are, where its 3,000 people work. But yes, the intent is to put some "higher, better-use" property on the market.

TimberWest, whose 344,000 hectares on Vancouver Island make it the largest holder of private forest lands in Western Canada, is also looking to sell higher-use property. It has identified 38,000 hectares that has a greater value as real estate, and that it plans to sell over the next 10 to 15 years.

In fact, real estate sales netted \$13.9 million -- or more than half of TimberWest's distributable cash -- in the last quarter of 2006.

"During the quarter, we sold real estate from Campbell River in the northern part of our holdings down to Sooke," company president Paul McElligott said in a news release last week. Real estate sales netted \$32.9 million for the year.

"We're evolving into more of a land-management company," TimberWest's Steve Lorimer said yesterday. Forestry is still at the core of the business, but it only makes sense to develop land in urban areas, or in areas like Cowichan Lake or the Nanaimo Lakes, where recreational property is in demand.

But while real estate development might make good business sense, it's also in stark contrast to forest companies' constant cries for access to fibre. After all the Clayoquots, all the Walbrans, how can an industry that insists it needs more wood justify turning working forests into suburbia?

"It's creaming," says NDP forestry critic Bob Simpson. Once logging land has been stripped and flipped, it's gone for good. Likewise, Simpson's colleague Claire Trevena, whose riding includes fibre-hungry mills in Campbell River and Port Alice, is not impressed by TimberWest's donation of 40 acres to the Vancouver Island Health Authority for a new hospital between Courtenay and Campbell River; she says it will enhance the development potential of TimberWest's surrounding forest. "It's outrageous, the whole shift to real estate," she says.

Outrage over land use is nothing new to the Island, of course, whether the players be forest companies, aboriginals, environmentalists, loggers or developers, all trying to work their agendas out of the same piece of rock.