

The Tree Farm Giveaway

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Few experts would deny that the coastal forestry sector faces significant challenges over the coming years. The challenges of the softwood lumber agreement and a rising dollar combined with softening in the U.S. housing market has created less than ideal conditions for the industry on the coast to thrive.

In addition to these variables, rapid urbanization of rural areas in the south Island has restricted where logging operations can take place.

In the 1950s, tree farm licenses or TFLs were created by government on Vancouver Island. Tenures to harvest the land were granted to private forest companies.

In our area, the forerunners of the current Western Forest Products (WFP) put private lands into the TFLs to gain access and rights to manage larger and often more productive blocks of public lands. The advantages to the companies were competitive tax regimes and secure access to the land base. The companies benefited in the form of sustained profits over time and the community benefited from employment in the local area and taxes to the crown.

In January this year all that changed. With the stroke of a pen the Liberal Forest Minister Rich Coleman, altered the future for all taxpayers and particularly the residents living and working along the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

The social and economic contract between community and company was changed profoundly when the B.C. Liberals allowed a removal of 28,000 hectares of private land from the TFLs on the Island, 12,000 hectares of which lay west of Sooke toward Jordan River.

Since the quiet, low-key announcement, public interest in the issue has risen significantly.

In February I called on the government to explain the rationale for the decision to remove public oversight on these lands. The response from the Minister was that the Liberals wanted to provide flexibility to WFP so they could manage the fiscal challenges that decades of under capitalization had caused the industry.

During the debate of the forestry budget in April I asked the minister what the decision would mean to forest jobs and land development in the area. He responded that the jobs would remain and that he expected WFP to continue as before.

On the prospect of large land sales and the ability of the communities on the coast to manage development, that was “not his problem”.

Fast forward to this summer and we have the publication of a development prospectus by Colliers International on behalf of WFP.

The “no change” expectations created by the forest minister were exploded when WFP put 2,500 hectares of property on the real estate market. Among the lands being offered is more than five kilometres of water front property — imagine the value of that land alone.

Add parcels at Sooke Pot Holes and near the sensitive Muir Creek area and you suddenly have a public issue that brings together loggers, surfers, trail walkers, conservationists, and community leaders.

At a public meeting at the Shirley Community Hall last week — that saw people overflowing the venue into the street — we learned that the 2,500 hectares now for sale represent more than 45 per cent of the land covered by the area’s official community plan.

That is a staggering amount of land available for immediate development. The fire, water and transportation infrastructure required to manage the potential influx of people is not in place. The distances from Sooke to Jordan River already stretch the capacity of the area volunteer fire brigades.

Compounding the challenge is the governance structures currently in place in the unincorporated areas of the Juan de Fuca electoral area.

Forestry, recreation and development issues are at the heart of community concern. Even minimal consultation with affected groups would have shown the government that they were on the wrong track. No consultation took place at all.

By allowing the exclusion of these lands from public control the Gordon Campbell government has relinquished the opportunity to protect areas like the Jordan River surf beach — an issue that brought dozens of young people to their first public meeting.

It has put the future of forest activity and jobs in doubt and it has put strains on the ability of rural communities to chart the course of growth and development.

As the fall session of the Legislature begins I have been given a clear message from my constituents. Call on Premier Campbell to recognize a mistake has been made and to demand he take steps to protect the public interest.

If you have thoughts on this or other provincial matters contact me at 391-2801 or by e-mail at John.Horgan.MLA@Leg.bc.ca.

John Horgan is the NDP MLA for Malahat-Juan de Fuca.