

Officials want to avoid heavy hand in logging protest

Officials have yet to move in on Castle area logging protesters

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Castle area logging protesters sent photos of their camp Wednesday, disputing an inaccurate report made Tuesday that provincial government officials said the camp had been dismantled. (Gordon Petersen/Protester)

Officials with Sustainable Resource Development have yet to move in on protesters who want to stop logging in a foothills recreation area in southwestern Alberta.

"We're following our due process. We're not being heavy-handed here," department spokesman Duncan MacDonnell said Wednesday.

"There's something to be said for that."

The Canadian Press erroneously reported in an earlier story that provincial government officials had said they had dismantled a camp set up by protesters wanting to stop logging in the area. In fact, the information came from the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.

Protesters set up camp two weeks ago in the Castle Mountain area to block logging trucks owned by Calgary-area forest company Spray Lake Sawmills. Sierra Club Canada said Wednesday that a rotating picket line and outfitters camp were still stopping Spray Lakes staff from getting in.

MacDonnell said the protesters have been told at least twice that they are trespassing and signs have been posted on their tents to say they are "unauthorized structures."



Castle area logging protesters sent in this photo Wednesday, saying they are still set up in the area, despite an eviction notice sent Monday and claims Tuesday the camp had been taken down. (Gordon Petersen/Protester)

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Compliance officers go to the site every day to document what's happening, take photographs and shoot video, he said.

"This is an active investigation under the Public Lands Act," he said. "We're continuing to give them verbal and written notification at each step of the way that they are violating the ... act and advising them that enforcement action could follow."

MacDonnell didn't say what that action could be. Nor did he specify what penalties the protesters could face. For now, the department hasn't taken down the tents.

"We want to see a peaceful resolution to this. It's been very civil up to this point, but we want to see it come to an end."

The Sierra Club suggested protesters aren't going anywhere.

"We have to hold the line on this protected area or else the others throughout Alberta are at risk too," Peter Sherrington, a resident of the nearby hamlet of Beaver Mines, said in the Sierra Club release.

The ad hoc protest group called Stop Castle Logging has indicated it will maintain a presence at the site until a court order is given or the RCMP come.

The protesters say taking down trees in the area will hurt tourism, disrupt the watershed and destroy core grizzly bear habitat.

Premier won't step in

They want Premier Alison Redford to stop logging until there's a better protection plan, but she has said she won't step in. She says there is a forest management agreement in place and two-thirds of the land is protected. She says less than one per cent of the trees are to be logged for economic development.

She says the protest is now a legal matter.

Almost two dozen businesses that have signed on in opposition are asking people to contact Redford with their concerns.

"When I see the people come and the large toys that they are hauling with them, the sleds, the trailers, the all-terrain vehicles, obviously they're coming there to play, and they're not coming there to play in stumps," Rebecca Holand, co-owner of a general store in the nearby hamlet of Beaver Mines, told a news conference in Lethbridge on Tuesday.

"They're coming there to play because of the beauty that's around there."

Sarah Elmeligi with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society said the matter is not just an environmental one.

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"The issue with the logging in the Castle special place is not just an issue of ecological importance," she said. "There are local businesses that will be directly impacted by this action and are concerned about their long-term economic viability."

Holand said 90 per cent of her business at her store comes from tourism.