

Province urged to halt logging in Castle region

Business owners, activist group send letters to new premier

By Tamara Gignac, October 15, 2011



Rebecca Holand and her husband Jacques Thouin stand inside their Beaver Mines General Store on September 3, 2010. They are among many Castle-area residents upset over logging in their corner of southwestern Alberta. Photograph by: Archive, Calgary Herald

Environmental groups and small business owners in southwestern Alberta are calling for newly elected Premier Alison Redford to revisit the issue of logging in the Castle region.

Hotel operators, shops and land owners say the burgeoning local tourism and recreation industry will be hurt with sections of forest cut out of the landscape.

Jacques Thouin operates the general store in Beaver Mines, a hamlet about 20 kilometres west of Pincher Creek.

It's on the road to the Castle Mountain ski area and a popular place for hikers, fishermen, hunters and campers who frequent the region.

But Thouin fears the visitors — and recreation dollars — will eventually disappear with logging trucks rumbling through the quiet area.

"It's very frustrating. The tourism industry can bring to government coffers much more money than what they're going to get from stumpage fees," said Thouin.

It's long been a controversial issue. Conservation groups argue the government-controlled lands should be better protected and would like Redford to designate the area a wildland park.

Pam Wright's business, Bow Point Nursery in the Springbank area, specializes in native plants. She currently collects seeds in one of the areas slated for logging.

“It’s such a unique area. One of the issues is they never put the plant material back that was there in the first place,” she said.

But Alberta Sustainable Resource Development insists that timber is harvested in a responsible manner. The watershed is in good condition after decades of logging in the region, said spokesman Dave Ealey.

“We’re quite supportive of logging activities when they are done according to our rules,” he said.

Timber harvesting also reduces the risk of mountain pine beetle infestations and wildfires, Ealey noted.

Last week, Redford appointed a new minister to the Sustainable Resource Development portfolio: Frank Oberle. Asked whether a change in government could translate into a different approach to logging in the Castle region, Ealey declined to comment.

“I wouldn’t speculate as to what people might look at. The reality is there is a renewable resource — our forests — and whatever we cut down, we regrow,” he said.

Two letters of opposition have been sent to Redford’s office, one from local business owners and another from a group of “34 local organizations” known as the Castle Special Place Working Group.

In a media interview in Lethbridge this past March, Redford acknowledged public concern about sensitive land issues in the Castle region.

Sarah Elmeligi, a senior conservation planner with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, said she’d like to see the premier quash timber harvesting in the area once and for all.

“I think legislating the Castle as a wildland park and putting an immediate stop to these logging plans is a great way for her to demonstrate her commitment to change,” she said.

tgignac@calgaryherald.com

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