

Market action targets Cochrane sawmill

By Enrique Massot, May 3, 2011

A group of environmental organizations has launched a market action campaign against a Cochrane-based sawmill in hopes to discourage logging in the Crowsnest Forest, in the southern Alberta foothills.

“Southern Alberta isn’t short of fence posts or lumber,” said Dianne Pachal of the Sierra Club Canada.

“It’s short of the three big Ws: water, wildlife habitat and wild lands.”

But a representative of Spray Lake Sawmills (SLS) said the company disagrees with the group’s reasons for the action. Logging in the Crowsnest Forest is permitted under the C5 Forest Management Plan recently approved by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD).

The plan allows SLS annual timber quotas up to 2026 and logging could start as soon as June.

“We believe we have good forest management,” said SLS woodlands manager Gord Lehn.

The company noted in a release that through careful assessment, consultation and comprehensive planning SLS strives to create harvest patterns that perpetuate the multiple values and uses of the forest. However, environmental groups such as the Alberta Foothills Network argue the forest, which covers the foothills of the Rockies from Kananaskis Country to the Waterton Glacier International Peace Park, should be preserved for its watershed value, and for its rich wildlife habitat.

Gord Petersen, with the Castle-Crown Wilderness Association, said the area should be kept as a recreation and tourism destination and for its capacity to absorb, filter and slowly release water feeding southern Alberta rivers.

“It is at the heart of the recreation area,” he said. “Why would they log here?”

The environmental network sent letters to 87 lumber retailers in the province asking them to refrain from selling SLS wood from the Crowsnest Forest.

The market action does not include the sale of wood cut from the Bow Forest, where SLS is taking steps for certification by the independent Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

The network asked citizens to purchase only FSC-certified wood products and wants Alberta Sustainable Resource Development and SLS to undertake the same certification process for the Crowsnest Forest.

Two-thirds of provincial forests allocated to SLS are currently being assessed for FSC certification, Lehn said. However, he added, the provincial government controls logging in the Crowsnest Forest and therefore decides about certification.

“(The government) ended up following the Canadian Standards Association,” he said.

The FSC certification, the network argues, is the only one that has been jointly recognized by industry, First Nations, and social and environmental organizations for its strict environmental and social standards, community involvement and protection of sensitive areas. Sustainable Resource Development spokesperson Dave Ealey said the Castle River area was earmarked as one of Alberta’s special areas where logging can take place.

“This area has been going for almost a century through managed uses,” Ealey said in an April 28 telephone interview.

Ealey said two thirds of the forest is off-limits to loggers.

“Only one third of the forest is available and only one per cent is cut in any particular year,” he said.

However, the Crowsnest Public Advisory Committee, which helped develop a draft logging plan, expressed concerns about the plan’s block maximum size of 500 hectares.

Such cuts, the committee noted, “have great potential to compromise the ecological and social values inherent in the plan.

“Important issues such as fragmentation, connectivity and habitat patches have not been addressed.”

To find out more about SLS’s harvest plans, the company is holding an open house at its office on Griffin Road in Cochrane May 4 from 3-7 p.m. New harvest plans include areas in Atkinson, Jumping Pound, McLean Creek and Coal Camp.