

VAN SUN SEPT 17, 07

Island mayors get course in troubled forest industry

ECONOMY | Session includes discussions with CEOs

BY ANDREW A. DUFFY

VICTORIA — Vancouver Island mayors got a crash course in the troubled coastal forestry industry with a day-long seminar held Tuesday in Cowichan Bay.

Hosted by the Coast Forest Products Association and Forestry Innovation Investment, industry experts touched on tumultuous international markets, future opportunities for coastal wood, safety in the woods, and the government's take on the coastal industry's future.

It may have been meant as

Forestry 101, but at least one Island mayor was hoping for more than just being brought up to speed.

"I'd like to see some common sense come out of this," said Ken McRae, mayor of Port Alberni, one of the hardest hit Island forest communities. "Let's not cry about the coast anymore. We know about the [strong Canadian] dollar and the [slumping] housing market in the U.S., so let's get beyond that. We've been talking about that for years."

The session included the CEOs of the key Island forest companies providing one-on-one discussions about specific community issues.

Rick Jeffery, president of the Coast Forest Products Association, said the broad outline defined the coast's challenges

and what the industry is doing to deal with them.

"A lot of the information mayors get comes from the media," said Jeffery. "A lot of these folks aren't full-time mayors and, therefore ... their understanding may be a mile wide but an inch deep. We're trying to provide them with information to give them a better understanding of what's facing the industry."

McRae agreed, noting the makeup of small-town councils has changed.

"When I first got involved [in politics], a lot of the mayors had been involved in the forest industry and knew quite a bit about it, but it's not like that now," said the former paperworkers union leader. "It's a different breed of mayor these days."

CanWest News Service