

B.C. launches radical forest-sector overhaul
Environment, economy behind shift to logging second-growth timber, minister says

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Victoria intends to remake the coastal forest industry with a new set of policies aimed at shifting harvesting away from old-growth forests to second-growth, Forests Minister Rich Coleman said Wednesday.

In a meeting with The Vancouver Sun editorial board, Coleman said a new approach is needed because of environmental pressures on the coast's remaining old-growth forests and the need for the depressed coastal industry to invest in mills that can process smaller second-growth logs.

He said the new policies, to be released within the next two weeks, will encourage these goals by clamping down on exports of second-growth logs and shifting his ministry's priorities away from harvesting coastal old-growth forests. Further, he said he wants the coast to move closer to the kind of intensive forest management now in place in the U.S. Pacific Northwest.

Some of the policy changes, such as log export restrictions, will be imposed immediately.

Others, specifically a shorter rotation of harvesting in second-growth stands and more intensive management practices to increase growth rates, will take time.

He described the policies as a major shift for his ministry, which has operated on the understanding all the old-growth would be harvested before the transition to second-growth.

Old-growth logging will not end, he said, but the coming introduction of ecosystem-based management means it will be reduced with the timber likely heading to specialty markets.

"It will be controversial for some people who are in the log-cutting business," he said. "The old-growth forest is under stress anyway. We should understand that and the amount of it available to the marketplace is going to shift even more."

The move out of old-growth is long overdue, said Valerie Langer, director of the

coastal program for the environmental group ForestEthics.

"This is the kind of move that should have been made 20 years ago. Much of the old-growth is already fragmented," she said.

However, the plan for more intensive harvesting of second-growth forests condemns some of the coast's most biologically rich terrain to more frequent cycles of logging, she said.

Today's second-growth stands were logged originally because their biological richness promoted timber growth, she said.

"Areas where we have the most valuable salmon streams and ecosystems were logged first."

Rick Jeffery, of the Coast Forest Products Association, said the proposed changes, particularly the emphasis on more intense management of old-growth, is a positive step.

"Those kinds of moves will support recent investments in second-growth manufacturing capacity," he said, noting \$350 million has been invested in the last three years in upgrading the coast's antiquated sawmills.

New emphasis on second growth is expected to stimulate more investment in sawmills because the even-sized logs are easier for them to accommodate. But the old-growth forests have been the foundation of the coastal industry and despite the recent investments, manufacturing companies have been slow to respond to the changing nature of the timber supply. The result has been increased log exports to Washington state, where a modern sawmilling industry has blossomed in the last decade. Second-growth exports to those mills have ignited protests on Vancouver Island, where communities say their jobs are being exported.

The new policies are the result of talks held with industry stakeholders last year by Premier Gordon Campbell's adviser, Ken Dobell. It's the second attempt by Victoria to revitalize the coastal industry. A 2004 revitalization plan has been slow to translate into economic activity, Coleman said.

Coleman provided some details Wednesday, specifically that logs exported from Crown lands will be subjected to measures mirroring the 15-per-cent tax currently levied on lumber products under the softwood lumber agreement.

"On the Crown lands, I would anticipate that we are going to do something that is going to be in some people's minds a bit punitive but in other people's minds will mirror the relationship of the log to the border," Coleman said.

"We will continue to see some export of logs from the central and north coast

because they have no manufacturing up there."

There will also be a change in export policies on private lands, where companies have complained they're subject to restrictions limiting their ability to sell their logs to the highest buyer. Coleman didn't elaborate on what the change would be.

He said the change in export policies will be accompanied by a more gradual shift to an "economic rotation" of forests similar to what Weyerhaeuser does on its private lands in the Pacific Northwest.

There, timber is harvested after growing for 47 years. On coastal Crown lands, second-growth timber is not harvested for 60 to 80 years.

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