

## Coast forest labour has to do its share

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Special to the Sun

*Tuesday, July 17, 2007*

The current labour negotiations in British Columbia's coastal forest industry are part of turning around an industry that's been in decline for more than 15 years.

At a time when the Canadian dollar has skyrocketed from 62 cents to 95 cents against the U.S. dollar, the coastal industry is trying to maintain its global competitiveness. Tough to do with labour costs that are the highest in the world.

A recent report by the International Woods Group states: "As a result of various cost disadvantages, coastal B.C. has been one of the highest-cost softwood lumber-producing regions in the world."

Unfortunately, these realities are lost on Steve Hunt of the Steelworkers' union. Hunt (Soundoff, July 11) may find it comforting to cling to the cliched rhetoric of the past, but the coastal industry is changing.

All the players have a role in ensuring that the changes that are coming will lead to an industry that can thrive.

The provincial government has demonstrated that by embracing important policy reforms. Industry has stepped up, too. Specific actions include investments in:

- New multilateral safety initiatives through ForestSafe.
- New initiatives to expand our existing markets and find new ones.
- Eco-sensitive forestry through the Great Bear Rainforest initiative.
- More than \$350 million to upgrade sawmills, including mills such as those in Cowichan Bay, Chemainus and Queensboro which have resulted in increased productivity, better lumber recovery and more efficient coastal mills.

Our industry has also encouraged the completion of the Central and North Coast land use plans, working in consensus and partnership with many stakeholders. Importantly, we've worked with first nations so they, too, can share in forestry opportunities.

Hunt needs to do his homework on his new portfolio. Now is not the time to get the facts wrong.

But let's look ahead. Let's build on the progress made in 2003 when the union and industry mutually agreed to engage arbitrator Don Munroe to revamp the coast labour agreement with legislative assistance to be more cost-effective and to create the investor confidence

needed to rebuild the coastal industry.

Hunt may wish to continue the demand for inflexible and costly labour arrangements. These factors are well known to our investors; their re-emergence in the coast forest bargaining is already sending the wrong message.

It took the coastal industry a long time to get where it is today and we are not going to turn it around in three or four years; it's a 10-year push at least.

Without industry, union and government leadership and a lot of persistence, things will get worse.

The modest progress to date will be lost and the decline will continue in investment, jobs and community stability.

Our goal is a sustainable, competitive industry that benefits all: Employers, employees, their families and the many coastal communities dependent on the industry.

Labour has a role to play in being part of the solution.

Rick Jeffery is president and CEO of the Coast Forest Products Association.

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