

Forestry future solid

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While the current strike is painful, the forest industry has a bright future in the North Island, says Port Hardy Mayor Hank Bood.

"The North Island is more profitable because our hemlock is second growth and less expensive to harvest," said Bood after attending a Sept. 11 meeting in Cowichan Bay where forest industry executives spoke to West Coast community leaders.

Before the meeting, Coast Forest Products Association manager Rick Jeffery said "the future for many B.C. coastal communities goes hand in hand with the future of the forest sector," and "it's important for our community leaders to have the opportunity to engage in a dialogue which explores the impacts of global markets on wood products manufacturing in our communities."

The forestry union on strike, United Steelworkers, rejects the pitch and asks community leaders to remember the companies used similar tactics in 2003.

"We've seen this movie; it ends tragically for workers, their families and their communities," said Steelworkers Western Canada director Steve Hunt. "We can't believe, after their failure to honour the promises they made in 2003, they have the audacity to try this stunt again."

Hunt says the companies offered a billion dollars in investment over 10 years in return for concessions then, but nothing has happened. "They got what they wanted but they didn't deliver."

Despite the short term strife, Bood says the North Island long term picture is better. "We are harvesters, not secondary manufacturers, and our annual allowable cut is very stable," he said.

"The Interior is profitable, but the briefing from the forest industry showed the whole Coast isn't that profitable," said Bood. "I saw their profit and loss statements. There is not a lot there and it makes bargaining tougher."

Union members are "fighting for a real issue, but the companies aren't making much money," said Bood. But even though no negotiations are ongoing, the strike is "solvable ... it's just a matter of getting people together and hashing it out."

Further south, the forest industry's facilities are aging and less competitive. "The cost of harvesting hemlock is the biggest issue," said Bood. "The old way, using old growth timber and old mills, isn't working."

But even in the southern Coast, there are bright spots, said Bood. "The companies that do better are those who upgrade facilities and find niche markets in places like China and Japan," said Bood.

While those who have been without a pay cheque for eight weeks are definitely hurting, Bood says that so far the impact of the strike has been less than many expected.

"It is not as bad as it was in previous years because we are a little better diversified," said Bood. "There is a lot of work available and many people are working at other jobs."

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