

Opinion-Editorial

MOUNTAIN PINE BEETLE EMERGENCY RESPONSE

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The mountain pine beetle is an unprecedented natural disaster eating away at the mature pine forests of Interior B.C.

It's an emergency situation that has ramifications for every single resident of this province, whether they live in Victoria or Vanderhoof. Forestry is a key driver of British Columbia's economy, and it's estimated that by 2013, 80 per cent of the province's lodgepole pine will be affected by the mountain pine beetle. The infestation currently affects 7 million hectares.

Fortunately, there are things we can do now. Earlier this week we released the Mountain Pine Beetle Emergency Response: Canada-B.C. Implementation Strategy, which outlines a three-year business plan for the \$100 million we received from the federal government. We appreciate their support – the mountain pine beetle is a natural catastrophe that could move beyond B.C.'s borders, into the boreal forest and across Canada. This funding is in addition to the \$101 million that the province has already committed.

Spending is focused on priority areas identified by the federal government and based on the objectives outlined in the provincial Mountain Pine Beetle Action Plan. The implementation strategy suggests that funding be targeted in these areas:

- Fuel management treatments to reduce forest debris and dead trees that pose a risk of fire for communities and First Nations in mountain pine beetle-infested areas: \$24.8 million;
- Control the beetle's spread in parks and areas along the outer edges of the infestation: \$24.4 million;
- Economic development and diversification planning for impacted communities and First Nations: \$13.2 million,
- Research and development of new wood products and markets and for research to assist forest management decision-making: \$13 million;
- Forest cover data to assist forest management decision-making: \$10.9 million;
- Ecosystem restoration: \$7 million;
- Management of range issues: \$4.5 million; and
- Co-ordination and administration: \$2.2 million.

Our future actions build on those we've already taken. The Chief Forester has increased the allowable annual cuts in the hardest hit areas, and is continuing to review allowable annual cuts on an urgent basis.

To make the best use of temporary increased harvest levels, we've advertised new tenure opportunities for creating products other than dimensional softwood lumber. Two companies have expressed interest in building an oriented strand board plant and up to four industrial pellet plants. This new capital investment will bring new jobs and revenues to communities in the beetle-infested areas and will help diversify the forest sector.

This government is also enabling community associations and First Nations to determine their future by preparing regional recovery strategies. These include:

- \$1.7 million to the Cariboo Chilcotin Beetle Action Coalition, comprising the communities of 100 Mile House, Williams Lake and Quesnel.
- \$800,000 to the Omineca Beetle Action Coalition, comprising the communities from Smithers to Prince George.
- Future funding for First Nations' plans.

As well as communities for the future, we need forests for the future. Although by law forest licensees must reforest the areas they harvest, large tracts of dead standing trees will not be harvested for environmental or economic reasons. While most will regenerate naturally over time, areas that are valuable for wildlife habitat, water, fisheries, timber production or other forest values will require help to speed the reforestation process.

As part of our \$101 million, the province has committed \$86 million to speed regeneration in areas affected by wildfires and the catastrophic mountain pine beetle infestation.

Activities will include:

- surveys to identify the highest priority areas for treatments and planting,
- reforestation projects in areas damaged by wildfire or in areas within the infestation where young forests are struggling due to competing vegetation,
- research into environmental concerns and reforestation strategies to reduce risk of recurrences of the beetle epidemic, and
- mapping and inventory work to identify affected areas that will not be salvage logged but that will require planting or other assistance to ensure the establishment of thriving new forests.

The mountain pine beetle is having a devastating effect on the health of British Columbia's pine forests. Our government remains committed to ensuring the long-term economic sustainability and well-being of the province as a whole.

In the near future, I'll be announcing the Mountain Pine Beetle Emergency Response Team. This team will be challenged to find alternate solutions, think outside the box, and drive an agenda of innovation and recovery.