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Public Forest Council's Ground Hemlock Recommendations

Council has been asked to respond to a number of complaints about the ground hemlock harvest. These include allegations of trespass, theft, improper harvest (i.e. non-sustainable collection), non-payment to landowners and other misdeeds. After holding meetings with those involved in the industry as well as the general public, we conclude:

These allegations are widely reported and are most probably true. Moreover, we are assured that the situation continues to deteriorate with increasing rapidity. In an alarming note, we are warned that the entire future of a wild harvest of this plant is endangered.

We recommend the following steps to improve the situation:

1. Licensing, tagging, record keeping and site inspection.

There are many reports of unauthorized hemlock harvest and of stolen material being sold to Island buyers. While buyers are making strong efforts to prevent such happenings, we believe that a licensing system, harvester identification, and product tagging is necessary. This might be set up through the Wildlife Conservation Act or whatever mechanism is deemed appropriate.

- All buyers are required to obtain a licence, and to keep written records of purchases, amounts, origins, etc., for inspection.
- Except when harvesting on their own property, all harvesters are required to obtain and carry photo identification. This must be produced on demand of a property owner or designated officials.
- Landowners harvesting and selling ground hemlock from their own lands are required to present to the buyer a current property tax bill (or other piece of identification which indicates the property number and registered owner) and identification.
- All harvested bags must be identified with an approved tag before leaving the site.

2. Trespass

Unauthorized Ground Hemlock harvesting is but one example of the trespass problem. Most forest landowners are unaware that their unposted properties are essentially wide open to the public, with potential damage and liability. We understand that the Trespass Act is currently under review, and hope for some improvement for landowners.

- We recommend that the province publicize, perhaps with public meetings, the merits and constraints of the present Act and possible modifications to it. Landowners are in general uninformed about rights and procedures.
- In particular, the present method of posting property with easily-destroyed signs needs significant improvement. Colour-coding is used in other provinces and should be considered here.

3. Education for sustainability

It is probable that a good deal of the present harvest exceeds the recommended three-years' growth, and that the question of reharvesting after particular time periods also requires additional research.

- We recommend that the Department of Environment, Energy and Forestry engage in additional high-profile workshops and meetings with landowners, harvesters and other interested parties to discuss sustainability and work toward improvements in the harvest. In particular the '8-inch' harvest guideline needs to be discouraged. Research is urgently needed. The possibility of moving to a certification system should be closely examined.
- There is general agreement that a wild harvest of Ground Hemlock cannot maintain the industry indefinitely. We recommend that the agricultural production of this plant receive additional attention and priority.

In sum, we are alarmed at the present situation, and believe that government must play a much more active role in this embryonic industry.