

Logging towns await clear-cut answers

Mark Hume. *The Globe and Mail*. Toronto, Ont.: Sep 11, 2007. pg. S.1

Abstract (Summary)

"The fact that one logging company can put the health of 23,000 people at risk, in spite of widespread public opposition and the objections of the regional government, represents an advanced stage of resource tyranny in this province," stated the environmental group which, in 1997, fought unsuccessfully to stop logging in a local watershed. In that battle, more than 40 people were arrested for blocking an access road before logging took place.

Full Text (718 words)

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Court case over water quality on the Sunshine Coast could set precedent across the province

Small communities throughout the province are watching with interest this week as a legal battle unfolds in the Supreme Court of British Columbia over a health order that has partially halted logging on the Sunshine Coast.

Western Forest Products Inc. is in court to appeal an order by the Sunshine Coast local board of health that last month determined logging in the Chapman Creek watershed posed a public health hazard because it threatened to increase the amount of silt in the drinking-water supply.

WFP, which is restricted from logging on slopes with a steepness of 60 degrees or more, is arguing the local board of health overstepped its authority, was biased and made its ruling based on incorrect information.

For many, however, the issue is a much broader question about whether local communities can stop logging in the forests that surround the lakes and streams that supply their drinking water.

"The issues discussed in court today are not unique to the Chapman Creek watershed," said Tracy Wachmann, a representative of one of several groups that held a rally on the courthouse steps before the hearing began yesterday.

She said the negative impact of logging on drinking water is something that should concern everyone, because almost every community in B.C. gets its drinking water from forested areas that are open to logging.

"The public should be alarmed that this is happening in community watersheds throughout the province," she said, as supporters held up large photos showing clear-cut zones in watersheds.

Ms. Wachmann's group, the Committee for the Protection of the Jefferd Creek Watershed, is fighting to stop logging in an area where the community of Stillwater, near Powell River, has been getting its drinking water since the 1920s.

Logging plans are currently being completed for Jefferd Creek despite community protests.

Ms. Wachmann is hoping the Sunshine Coast order will stand, so communities such as hers can use health orders to trump Ministry of Forest and Range logging permits.

Michael Gildersleeve, Director of the Blue Mountain Kanaka Creek Conservation Group, said his organization is worried about logging on the east shore of Alouette Lake, where some 1,800 residents in the Fraser Valley get their drinking water.

Keith Wyton, of the Save Our Valley Alliance, from Port Alberni on Vancouver Island, said local residents are concerned that springs and aquifers might be affected by logging in the Alberni Valley.

The Valhalla Wilderness Watch, in the West Kootenay region, issued a statement yesterday expressing support for the Sunshine Coast Regional District's use of the Health Act.

"The fact that one logging company can put the health of 23,000 people at risk, in spite of widespread public opposition and the objections of the regional government, represents an advanced stage of resource tyranny in this province," stated the environmental group which, in 1997, fought unsuccessfully to stop logging in a local watershed. In that battle, more than 40 people were arrested for blocking an access road before logging took place.

Inside court, Daniel Webster, a lawyer for Western Forest Products, argued that the Sunshine Coast local health board had no good reason to suspect that logging would damage water quality.

He said studies found that WFP was logging to standards higher than those set out in provincial forestry regulations.

"Western built bridges when culverts would have sufficed," he said to illustrate how the company was striving to protect the environment.

He said research has found that logging has no significant impact on water quality until more than 25 per cent of a watershed has been logged, and less than 10 per cent of Chapman Creek was subject to logging in total.

"There is simply no substantial threat to drinking water [in Chapman Creek]," he said.

Mr. Webster also argued that a \$7-million water-treatment plant, built on the Sunshine Coast in 2004, would have prevented any dirty water from getting to consumers, so a health hazard could not have existed even if logging had done damage.

He accused the local health board of being biased, and said the order restricting logging was issued because people didn't want to see forests cut in the watershed, not because of any legitimate health concerns.

The hearing is expected to continue for several days.

Indexing (document details)

Author(s): Mark Hume
Document types: News
Dateline: *Vancouver BC*
Section: *British Columbia News*
Publication title: The Globe and Mail. Toronto, Ont.: Sep 11, 2007. pg. S.1
Source type: Newspaper
ISSN: 03190714
ProQuest document ID: 1333706591
Text Word Count 718
Document URL: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1333706591&sid=4&Fmt=3&clientId=74388&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

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