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Logging begins in K-Country

Opponents fear effect on tourism, local businesses

Sean Myers, Calgary Herald

Published: Wednesday, November 21, 2007

New logging is underway in Kananaskis despite fears the block cutting could hurt recreational activity and potentially affect Calgary's water quality.

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development approved the forest management plan submitted by Spray Lake Sawmills in the summer, and in September gave the company the OK to start cutting trees near Barrier Lake.

The Cochrane-based logging company began cutting in recent weeks, according to a spokesman.

On Nov. 8, the Save Kananaskis Society presented the legislature its 1,232-name Tag-A-Tree petition to create a park on the proposed site as a last-ditch effort to stop the logging.

"A lot of people say they've been logging there for years, what's the big deal? But when they were logging there 50 years ago, there was no Kananaskis or a city of a million people 20 minutes away," said Doug Sephton, a Bragg Creek resident and spokesman for the Save Kananaskis Society.

"This is one of the most popular spots for recreation in K-Country, and they're going to leave a scarred moonscape. People will go somewhere else. It's going to hurt businesses in Bragg Creek, and it's going to affect outdoor businesses in Calgary."

Gord Lehn, spokesman for Spray Lake, said the company conducted extensive public consultations to address concerns over its forest management plan.

"They have a bit of the fear of the unknown," said Lehn. "I can understand why they're worried, but all those things have

been addressed."

Spray Lake Sawmills has been logging in the area since 1943.

In September 2001, the company signed a forest management agreement with the province covering 3,374 square kilometres -- a swath of land near Sundre, just east of Banff National Park, and another in K-Country, west of Bragg Creek.

Last spring, the City of Calgary expressed unease over the impact logging would have on the watershed and what that would mean for water quality.

If too many trees are cut in the watershed, the annual spring runoff could occur sooner than the city plans for, and the water it brings could pick up more contaminants along the way that would normally be soaked up by the forest.

This water would then require added treatment.

But John Jagorinec, a senior water quality and regulatory analyst for the city, said Spray Lake and the province have allayed most of the city's fears with the new plan, to be in effect for 20 years.

"(The province) gave us their assurance that if our water quality was abnormally affected because of logging, they have the ability to change the logging plan," said Jagorinec.

He said Sustainable Resources agreed to do modelling on the effects of the logging on water availability; to partner with the city to monitor and test the water quality; and to consider the effects of climate change in their modelling.

Lehn said the company will "hop-scotch" around the region, leaving "islands" of trees in logged areas to ensure forested sightlines.

The company will also plant new trees before it moves on.

Lehn said the company always targets older pine growth to combat mountain pine beetles.

But Sephton said forests are more than just natural resources to be plucked and sold.

"To treat Kananaskis as just another forest with marketable timber does not recognize the hundreds of thousands of people and hundreds of businesses that use and rely on it," said Sephton. "We're not raging environmentalists spiking trees. We're recreational users and business owners concerned about our way of life and economic well-being."

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