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Logging of Kananaskis defended as valuable tool

By Brad Herron
The Eagle

Responding to criticism about the plan to log parts of Kananaskis, the woodlands manager at Spray Lake Sawmills said logging in that area is a valuable forest conservation tool.

Gord Lehn has heard the arguments from the Save Kananaskis group, and while he admits some of its points are valid, he says the sawmill's history in the area speaks much louder.

"If people like what they see out there and it has so many great attributes, maybe we need to continue out there," Lehn said Nov 5.

The sawmill has been working in Kananaskis since 1943, and Lehn said with "64 years under our belts," they have learned how to manage a forest.

"There is a misconception that Kananaskis will be clear cut," Lehn said.

He said this is not the case, as a long-term plan is put in place, both for the sawmill and the environment.

Due to the mountain pine beetle crossing the Rocky Mountains, Spray Lake has shifted its forest management plan to focus on susceptible areas in Kananaskis.

Doug Sephton, organizer of the Save Kananaskis group, said recently that this is the wrong strategy and that Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) is pushing the sawmill into an area where it doesn't want to be.

"It takes more to clean up the mess than Spray Lake gets for cutting it down," he said.

Sephton believes the best economic decision for the area would be to halt the logging and turn the area into a park. He said a creation of a park would be essential for the region's future.

"Once they get to the Elbow (River), we will just pack up and go home," Sephton said.

Although the Save Kananaskis group has been vocal, Spray Lake Sawmills is "working off the premise that (the park) is not a possibility." Lehn said this is because the sawmill has a forest management agreement approved until 2026.

Admitting a recently logged area doesn't possess many aesthetic qualities, Lehn said "it doesn't look like that forever."

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With the pine beetle threat approaching, Lehn said something needs to be done in the forest to maximize its economic potential, as well as environmental and recreational sustainability. "If the beetle comes in and kills pine, you have a lag period," Lehn explained. When the pine tree dies, it turns red and eventually begins to rot. As these trees fall over, they can close off trails and slow recreational activity. Lehn said the bigger risk may be fire, due to the number of power lines in the area. "In about 10 years time, you have a forest full of dead sticks falling on ignition sources," Lehn said. While M.D. councillor for Bragg Creek Harvey Buckley does not have the authority to stop logging, he will not oppose plans and encourages a managed harvest. As a grass farmer, Buckley said his grasslands need to be harvested to maximize their potential and the forest is the same, just on a much longer cycle. "You have to look beyond today," Buckley said. While knocking on doors during the civic election campaign, Buckley said he learned there "are many people opposed to the Save Kananaskis group." When the Oct. 15 election results were tabulated, Buckley said people spoke for what they wanted, forest management. If nothing is done, Buckley said Bragg Creek will "end end up an old growth forest and a big fuel build-up." "These people don't realize the tinder boxes they live in," Buckley said. Sephton said Bragg Creek now has "Ted Morton and a Ted Morton clone as our elected representatives," referring to the Foothills-Rocky View MLA and head of SRD, and Buckley. He believes the government needs to get logging companies to manage the woods, instead of acting as deforesters and he doesn't see that happening. "Spray Lake should be engaged as gardeners of Kananaskis," Sephton said. Lehn said the Cochrane company is already doing that. During their years in business, Lehn said "logging patterns have changed a lot. "There is nothing pretty about seeing standing dead snags," Lehn said about what happens if nothing is done in advance of the pine beetle. Logging in a heavily forested area has its benefits. Lehn said it allows young trees to flourish and opens areas for people and wildlife. "That's exactly where you want to be if you're big-game hunting."