

Plenty of parks in B.C., forest minister says

By Gordon Hamilton, Vancouver Sun

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VANCOUVER - The British Columbia coast has enough parks and protected areas, Forests Minister Rich Coleman told the annual Truck Loggers Association convention Thursday.

Loggers no longer need to worry about losing timber to parks, he said.

"We are not going to have any shrinking landbase any more. We have enough protected areas and parks," the minister said during a panel discussion at the annual convention now underway in Vancouver. "Let's recognize that and celebrate it. But remember: we need a working forest for the future of our system."

Coleman, who had to defend his government over criticism from the loggers that it no longer considers forestry a key file, made the statement after saying stakeholders in the troubled industry need to "set aside issues between each other."

He also vented some annoyance about his own job.

"I'm just a little frustrated with the people on the coast of British Columbia who keep saying 'quit cutting all the old-growth forest' when there is four million hectares of old-growth forest in the province of British Columbia and there is only 700,000 hectares available for harvest."

At one point Coleman mused: "I wonder some days just what I did to the premier to have been made the forests minister."

Coleman also said the government is working on resolving other issues to ensure there is a enough timber on the coast, such as getting timber on the market that was taken from tenure holders and provided to first nations. The first nations often didn't have the capacity to harvest it and it has not come back on the market.

He referred to it as "the black-hole wood."

Fellow-panelist and association president Don Bendickson, who spoke before the minister, said the government no longer lists the forest industry as one of its top-three files, a situation that must change.

He called for major policy changes to encourage more players in the industry and a deeper commitment to the forest landbase. The coastal region now has 30 per cent more land in parks and protected areas than is available for logging, Bendickson said. He also

said contract loggers need assurances that the new ecosystem-based management being developed won't make harvesting too costly in the working forest.

"If we want an industry, we need a land base. Somebody has to draw a line in the mud and say 'enough is enough.' "

Coleman responded by saying: "This is B.C.'s critical industry."

Later Bendickson said in an interview that he is encouraged by the minister's statement that the park-building era is over.

"We very much appreciate the minister's commitment to conserve the working forest land base," he said, noting that forestry provides benefits from funding schools and health care and providing employment to capacity-building for first nations.

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