

Private land versus public interest

By Fred Davies - Parksville Qualicum Beach News



A drop site for logs felled in an area adjacent to the Englishman River Provincial Park. Tensions between timber companies and opponents to old growth logging, particularly near protected parks, was high in 2009. PQ News File Photo

The News reviews top issues from 2009 and updates them for 2010: Logging in the mid-Island raises ire

Logging operations on privately managed lands near protected parks was a hot button issue in 2009 and there's no sign relations between the forestry companies and activists intent on protecting remaining old growth forests will improve anytime soon.

Things got off to a rocky start in February when Island Timberlands carried out selective, old growth, logging from an island in the Englishman River; not far from a nearby provincial park. Environmentalists called foul and the matter gained widespread attention after a Parksville city politician, there to investigate matters for himself, was forced to flee falling branches after a helicopter appeared at the active logging site.

"I think the circumstances around that unfortunate incident brought a lot of awareness to the issue," said councillor Chris Burger.

"We have to move past the commotion and engage in dialogue with the provincial government. They're the ones who actually legislate what happens in riparian areas on private managed lands."

Burger noted the city took a strong stance against the controversial logging with a resolution calling for the province to end all logging in the proximity of the Englishman River taken to the annual meeting of the Union of B.C. Municipalities.

Burger said he believed the resolution might have passed, with the weight of the UBCM then in a position to advocate on the city's behalf, but, due to time constraints, it never reached the floor.

"The vote is important because it reaffirms that this is not a concern that's specific to a certain area but is an issue wherever private forest lands come into play," Burger said.

"Why should Crown lands receive more protection when this is an area that provides Parksville's drinking water supply? ... I think you have to give value to these areas that goes beyond mere dollar figures.

"What I've learned is that it takes patience and willpower to make the changes we'd like to see," Burger concluded, adding the next chance for the UBCM to consider a similar resolution won't occur until the fall of 2010.

The work in question was subsequently investigated by the Private Managed Forest Land Council, an independent provincial agency comprised of government appointees and managed forest land owners, who deemed no contravention occurred at the site that would negatively effect fish habit or water quality.

The Englishman River wasn't the only place that attracted attention last year from those seeking an end to logging in areas perceived to be environmentally sensitive.

Early in the year a new watchdog group, The Arrowsmith Parks and Land-Use Council, formed in response to perceived logging threats in and around Cathedral Grove.

Though there were signs of an impasse, with Island Timberlands declaring in March that there were "no near-term harvesting plans on our lands adjacent to MacMillan Park," by October protesters gathered to decry old growth logging occurring on a slope in the Cameron River basin near the park boundaries.

Continued calls for a moratorium on old growth harvest resulted with APLUC member Berni Pearce declaring, "we have had no indication that Island Timberland wishes to be a good corporate citizen, friendly to community concerns about Cathedral Grove."

Adding to the impression of a deepening rift between the timber company and detractors of their logging practice was the expulsion, over Easter, of APLUC members Ronda and Gary Murdock from a Hamilton marsh community event taking place on the forestry company's land.

"We shouldn't be cutting any more old growth trees, there's so little left," said Gary.

He noted logging, even outside of protected land, still affects nearby watercourses and can impact adjacent trees through blow down resulting from the harvest.

A representative for Island Timberlands could not be reached but the company has said in the past they have a Englishman River watershed planning document, developed with public input, that goes above and beyond minimum standards. The company has also indicated it is engaged in infrastructure upgrades along the watercourse and remains open to land acquisition offers.

Towards the end of the year the Western Canada Wilderness committee was calling for exactly that, asking the provincial and federal governments to establish a B.C. parkland acquisition fund of \$40 million per year to purchase old-growth forests and other endangered ecosystems on private lands. As

2009 waned the protected area around Englishman River actually did increase, thanks to a 9.17 hectare covenant agreement between TimberWest and The Nature Trust.

APLUC member Paul Grinder said resolutions passed by council in both Parksville and Qualicum Beach in relation to concern over the logging industry's impact on local watersheds is indication the issue "goes beyond just being a concern of the tree huggers and environmentalists.

Also of note in 2009 was widespread concern raised by the chair of the Regional District of Nanaimo and others regarding TimberWest's move towards the sale of private timberlands and the effect that might have once development on those properties begin to demand infrastructure and places its burden on local aquifers.

"It's informed citizens everywhere that are quite concerned about this. We've done a pretty good job in getting the public's attention on this ... The issue is really a death of a thousand cuts. One item here or there might not harm anything but the cumulative impact can be very harmful," said Grinder.