

Sunshine Coast logging labelled 'health hazard'

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VANCOUVER — For the first time in British Columbia, perhaps in Canada, logging has been ordered stopped in a watershed because it poses a potential “health hazard” to downstream communities.

In an unusual move, the Sunshine Coast Regional District used the Health Act to protect its drinking water by ordering Western Forest Products Inc. to stop logging on steep slopes in the Chapman Creek watershed.

The mountainous, thickly forested watershed provides drinking water to about 21,000 residents on the Sunshine Coast, between Langdale and Earl's Cove, north of Vancouver.

Although logging, the mainstay of the provincial economy for more than a century, has been halted for environmental reasons in the past, it hasn't been labelled by any government as hazardous to human health before.

Patricia Chew, executive director of West Coast Environmental Law, hailed the order as a precedent-setting decision that could spill over into other B.C. communities where there are concerns about the impact of logging on the quality of drinking water.

“The Sunshine Coast Regional District is a trailblazer for other local governments across B.C. seeking to restrict logging and other industrial activity that threatens drinking water,” said Ms. Chew, whose non-profit organization helped fund citizen submissions to the regional district.

Barry Janyk, who is both the mayor of the town of Gibsons and a member of the regional district board that approved the order in a vote Saturday, said the public response to the decision has been overwhelmingly positive.

“We've heard nothing but praise, without exception. ... There's a sense justice has been upheld,” Mr. Janyk said from Gibsons.

The pretty seaside village was made famous as the central setting for the long-running CBC series *The Beachcombers*, about log salvagers who made their living from the forest industry.

The influence of logging has waned, however, and the Sunshine Coast is now better known as a retirement and recreational haven.

Mr. Janyk said that during five days of hearings, the regional district heard conflicting statements on the impact of logging on drinking water. In the end the directors decided to opt on the side of caution.

“This really goes to the whole principle of is it worth the risk?” he said of weighing the economic worth of logging against the value of clean drinking water.

The order states the regional district “has every reason to believe that a health hazard ... exists due to the forestry activities undertaken by WFP in the watershed.”

It orders Western Forest Products to “cease all forestry activities” in the watershed where slopes have a steepness of 60 per cent or more.

It also orders the company to stop building roads, to stop all activities within 30 metres of any watercourse, and to retain a hydrologist to work under the direction of the regional medical health officer to monitor water quality.

The order came into effect Sunday.

Gary Ley, a spokesman for Western Forest Products, said Monday the company is studying the order and has not yet decided how to respond.

He said the company wants to harvest about 47 hectares, in the 7,000-hectare watershed, under logging plans reviewed by the Ministry of Forests.

For the past few years there has been a running battle between Western Forest Products and local residents, and this summer the company got an injunction to stop a logging road blockade.

Those opposed to logging recently took their complaints to the regional district, arguing that drinking water was at risk, and triggering a review.

Dr. Paul Martiquet, medical health officer with Vancouver Coastal Health, responsible for the Sunshine Coast, said he couldn't issue an order without proving a threat was “imminent.”

But he's glad the regional district, which has more leeway, took the step.

“I think it's a very courageous decision,” he said.

Logging in drinking watersheds is controversial throughout the province but few communities have the authority to stop it.

Metro Vancouver, which has a 999-year lease for its watersheds, and Victoria's Capital Regional District, which last week bought 10,000 hectares from TimberWest Forest Corp., are among the few jurisdictions that forbid logging.