

Water supplies must come first

Court battle pits municipalities against firms over logging in area watersheds

It is only common sense that local governments should be able to protect drinking water sources from damage or contamination caused by logging or other industrial activities.

That's why we support the legal battle that the Sunshine Coast Regional District is waging to limit logging on steep slopes in its watershed.

The regional district is blazing new legal ground in its efforts to control logging by Western Forest Products. Generally the province, through the Forests Ministry, has been responsible for approving companies' plans. Municipalities had no way to address potential problems.

But the Sunshine Coast RD has used powers available under the Health Act to order restrictions on logging on steep slopes and ban waste burning to protect Chapman Creek, which provides water to about 23,000 people. The company opposes the move, saying its plans have been approved by the province.

The Capital Regional District owns its watershed, and added to the protected area this month. But other communities rely on lands owned or controlled by timber companies or other

private owners for their water supplies.

Some, like the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District, have concerns about the effects of logging on water quality. And across B.C., more than 200 communities are under boil-water advisories today because of problems with their water sources.

Municipalities have a legitimate interest in water-source protection. Once damaged, through erosion that allows increased silting or contamination, water supplies can take generations to recover. The precautionary principle must apply.

And local politicians are the ones closest to the issue.

There is always the potential for abuse of the powers and companies must have the right to appeal municipal decisions. But the principle of local oversight is sound and should be advanced.

The issue has already been taken to the B.C. Supreme Court and a long series of legal skirmishes is likely.

That would be costly and unnecessary. Municipalities, whether through the Health Act or new legislation, should be able to protect the sources of their drinking water.