

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Feb. 17, 2009

The Editor
Kimberley Daily Bulletin
RE: MLA Report

Dear Editor:

I'm writing to disagree with the Feb. 17 column by Norm Macdonald, New Democratic Party MLA for Columbia-Revelstoke.

It's clear Mr. Macdonald lacks a full understanding of the forest industry or the unprecedented economic conditions it's facing. I hope to provide a more complete snapshot of B.C.'s forest sector and its promising future.

First, our government is committed to helping workers and forest-dependent communities weather the current downturn. To date, 3,500 people have received assistance through the \$129 million Community Development Trust, including nine forest workers hired to improve Kimberley's Nordic trails.

Looking forward, we're reducing our reliance on the U.S. market by aggressively pursuing new business in China. Since we opened an office there in 2003, exports of B.C. wood products have more than tripled. We expect volumes to be in the 750 million board feet range in 2009.

We're laying the groundwork for a bio-energy sector that ensures the utilization of otherwise unsalvageable timber. In 2008 alone, the B.C. wood pellet industry produced nearly one million tonnes of product, of which 90 per cent was exported for thermal power production.

We're establishing a Wood Innovation and Design Centre, which will serve as think-tank for architects and designers to expand uses for wood in residential and commercial construction. We've also amended the BC Building Code to allow for six-storey wood-framed apartment buildings and revised forest policy to improve fibre access for value-added operators.

Framing all these efforts are ongoing commitments to maintaining forest health and improving safety in the woods. This fiscal year alone, \$18 million was budgeted for forest health activities unrelated to the mountain pine beetle.

These initiatives will help strengthen our competitiveness and ensure we're ready to benefit when global markets rebound. But if there's one thing Mr. Macdonald and I agree on it's this: A viable and sustainable forest industry is essential to many B.C. communities. I'm from a forestry town myself, and understand first-hand what the sector means to regional economies.

There's no question the road ahead will be difficult, but I have every confidence in our skilled workers and the potential of our industry.

Pat Bell
Minister of Forests and Range