



Familiar problem threatening to explode

By Jim Stirling

As if the forest industry doesn't have enough concerns, a familiar problem is seething just below the surface, threatening to explode.

First Nations representatives in many parts of British Columbia are becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress senior governments are making toward addressing their concerns. Many of those concerns focus on demonstrating meaningful consultation and adequate accommodation of aboriginal interests.

As part of that, a forestry plan has been developed by the First Nations and presented to the provincial government along with a clear message.

“Unless there is some action in the very near future, there most certainly is the risk for escalating conflict and that's not just conflict that's already happening in the courts. We're talking about the kind of potential for major unrest,” Shawn Atleo warned reporters in Prince George last October.

Contrast that statement with what Atleo, a representative of the B.C. Assembly of First Nations, told the Logging & Sawmilling Journal in January 2008. He said there were growing pockets of discontent within his constituency, especially among younger people.

He was trying to defuse them and keep the lid on the situation. Atleo said the assembly was trying to maintain a reasoned approach, underpinned by the recognition of First Nations as governments and partners. Clearly, the situation has become worse since then.

The key element in the First Nations forestry plan is for legislation—before the May provincial election—to enable the creation of First Nations tenures. Wood for that, they say, should come from the approximately 20 per cent of the annual Crown timber supply dispersed through B.C. Timber Sales.

Many native groups in B.C. have already received forest licences and signed forestry agreements with the provincial government totaling in the tens of millions of cubic metres of timber. Some of the licences have been short term and non-renewable, which native groups say is uneconomical given today's timber marketing realities.

Other demands the First Nations are making include: entrenching in legislation First Nations title and rights; requiring BC Hydro to include First Nations as partners in future bio-energy requests; and encouraging the federal government to make good on its commitment to give 20 per cent of its \$1 billion beetle relief package to First Nations.

The 20 per cent figure in the latter demand is curious given that the native population in the province is closer to 10 per cent of the total.

The promotion of native rights through the court system continues to produce decisions which while not conclusive, add more to the natives' position than the Crown's. For example, a B.C. Supreme Court ruling last summer found the prov-

