

Aid aimed at flagging single-industry towns

ECONOMY | Three-year package will provide provinces with \$10 million, territories \$3 million

BY GORDON HAMILTON
VANCOUVER SUN

Prime Minister Stephen Harper unveiled a \$1-billion federal aid package Thursday aimed at helping the country's economically flagging single-industry towns.

The three-year aid package, which will initially provide each province with \$10 million and each territory with \$3 million in base funding, was announced by Harper at a sawmill in the New Brunswick forestry town of Tracyville, underscoring the strong forest industry component of the program.

But the 2006 Softwood Lumber Agreement the Harper government signed with the U.S. specif-

ically bans direct aid to the industry so the plan is being sold as a community development trust with no direct mention of forestry.

"This program is aimed at one-industry towns facing major downturns or communities plagued by chronic high unemployment or regions hit by layoffs across a range of sectors," the prime minister said.

"It's fairly creative," said John Allan, president of the B.C. Council of Forest Industries. "It's obviously got the softwood lumber agreement in mind in the sense that it's focused on communities and workers."

"We have communities like Mackenzie that are going to be in

desperate need of money if its mills don't open up."

B.C.'s northern Interior town of Mackenzie, with a population of 5,000, has lost 800 forest industry jobs within the last six weeks with announcements of major shutdowns and curtailments by AbitibiBowater and Canfor Corp.

Since last July, 11 sawmills, a pulp mill and panelboard plant have shut down in B.C. The impact on workers and communities has been 2,500 jobs, when shift curtailments and partial closures are included.

The crisis in B.C. is also being repeated across the country, where manufacturing and exporting industries are being hit by the dollar's climb. Their costs are tied to the appreciating Canadian dollar but their revenues are generally in depreciating U.S. dollars.

Allan noted, however, that the

federal program will be doled out to provinces on a per-capita basis. B.C., the country's largest manufacturer of forest products, will receive less than Ontario and Quebec.

Ontario, with population approaching 13 million, is expected to get \$350 million. B.C. with 4.4 million people is to receive \$129 million.

Forests Minister Rich Coleman described the funding formula as fair, particularly when combined with the \$300 million that Ottawa has committed so far over the mountain pine beetle epidemic.

"The reality is in British Columbia we have a very strong economy with the exception of one commodity, and that's forestry, which is being hit very hard. The dollar and U.S. housing starts are beating the heck out of our guys," Coleman said.

He said the federal plan is

adaptable province-by-province, a feature that B.C. sought.

"This allows us to adapt so if we can come up with a worker transition program for early retirements for people, so much the better. Whereas in Ontario, the issue may be in the manufacturing sector with the Auto Pact. "I am pleased that they allowed for that adaptability and that they identified it to things that won't affect our international trade agreements. The last thing we want to do is go back and start having that fight."

On the B.C. Coast, where the logging sector is facing the same pressures as the mills, Dave Lewis, executive director of the Truck Loggers Association, said the funding is a positive move.

"We are very grateful for the prime minister's attention and concern for our industry's workers."

But the structuring of the package reflects how the softwood agreement affects the forest industry, he said. The TLA is looking for support "for rebuilding our industry and for restructuring so that we can be once again global leaders and be building capacity, rather than reducing it."

Unions representing the country's forest workers called the plan long overdue but falling short of the what is needed to reverse the crisis in the manufacturing and forestry sectors.

"The loss of tens of thousands of jobs in communities that have depended on industries such as forestry for over a century is creating ghost towns across this country," United Steel Workers union national director Ken Neumann stated in a news release.

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B.C. ski resorts enjoy record week

Good snow conditions outweigh visitors' avalanche concerns

BY BRUCE CONSTANTINEAU
VANCOUVER SUN

B.C. ski resorts have attracted record numbers of visitors this week, as strong snow conditions offset concerns about avalanche issues.

Sun Peaks officials said skier visits this week surged 20 per cent over last year's pace while Big White Resort had its busiest January day ever on Wednesday — 19 per cent over the same day last year.

Whistler/Blackcomb wouldn't provide exact numbers but resort officials said their numbers are also up significantly this year.

The booming winter resort business comes despite recent avalanches in B.C. that have killed skiers and snowmobilers, including 21-year-old Australian skier Leigh Barnier, who died at Big White following an avalanche that ripped through the Parachute Bowl area.

Big White senior vice-president Michael Ballingall said the resort has many Australian and U.K. visitors this week and only a few potential visitors have expressed any safety concerns.

"We've had maybe have a dozen e-mails from people who say they won't come back unless we get an avalanche dog or something like that," he said in an interview.

Ballingall said some media reports after the Big White avalanche wrongly stated the area in question was a groomed run.

"That shook people up a bit so some people have phoned to get clarification



More than 121 centimetres of snow fell during the first week of January.

on that point," he said. "This was a rare and unique event and, yes, we promote safety. But you can't always guarantee it because there's an inherent risk in the sport of skiing and snowboarding."

"But if you stick to the rules and stay within the ropes and stay on groomed runs, you should be fine unless you have an accident."

Ballingall said Australian visitors in particular have been extremely impressed with Big White's snow conditions this year, as the mountain currently has a base of about 200 cm.

"People have just come from Melbourne, where it's 40 degrees, and there's bucketloads of snow here so they're pret-

ty excited," he said.

Sun Peaks representative Ashley Tait said avalanche concerns are clearly top of minds this week, but visitation to the mountain continues to rise. The 20-per cent increase in visitors this week follows an 11.6-per cent increase during the crucial holiday period between Dec. 22 and Jan. 6.

"After the Big White incident, we added more signage to our already very clear signage system to ensure our guests feel safe and secure," Tait said. "Every ski area has clearly defined boundaries."

She said a new GPS tracking system, which skiers wear on their arms to make themselves fully traceable at all times, has been popular with Sun Peaks visitors this season. About 700 visitors have paid \$6 a day to use the system in the past week.

Whistler/Blackcomb senior vice-president Stuart Rempel said skiers sometimes complain the resort is slow to open up certain areas to skiing and snowboarding.

"We'll only open up those areas when we feel they're safe for our guests," he said.

Rempel said it's common for experienced skiers to ski out of bounds but stressed they should only do so if they're properly trained and equipped.

He said people who ski in permanently closed areas are a major concern. The resort will banish those offenders for the season and RCMP will consider laying charges against them.

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Snow covers cafe umbrellas in an image taken from the Web cam in Whistler Village on Thursday afternoon.

Value of metro building permits drops by one third

November decline driven by slowdown in multi-family housing

BY DERRICK PENNER
VANCOUVER SUN

The value of Metro Vancouver building permits dropped by a third in November, driven mostly by a big drop in applications for multi-family housing projects, Statistics Canada reported Thursday.

Builders were issued permits for \$446 million worth of work in Metro Vancouver, compared with \$669 million the month before.

In its report, Statistics Canada attributed the decline to a decrease in multi-family permit applications, which were down across the province almost 50 per cent from the previous month.

However, Statistics Canada analyst Nicole Charron said there is not much that can be inferred from the month-to-month drop.

"October [building permits were] particularly high," Charron said. "There was a jump from September. [Permits] went down in November, but they were still above the September mark."

She added that there was an increase in the number of single-family housing permits issued in November compared with October.

Peter Simpson, CEO of the Greater Vancouver Home Builders' Association, said the November decline was likely more of a "timing issue" than indication of a trend.

Building-permit values can vary widely, especially if permits for large multi-family projects are issued in a particular month, and Simpson said there are fac-

tors that can influence the timing of permits.

Simpson added that it is taking longer for builders to obtain building permits across the Lower Mainland as short-staffed municipal building departments try to keep up with the torrid pace of building, so there may have been delays in issuing permits in November.

Builders also might be delaying permit applications until they know they have enough skilled tradespeople to proceed with a project.

November, was also a record month for new-home starts in Metro Vancouver, according to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. Builders started work on 2,704 new units during the month on permits already issued.

Statistics Canada also reported that the value of new Metro Vancouver homes crept up 0.2 per cent in November from October on its new-housing-price index, thanks largely to strong market conditions in the Lower Mainland.

To the end of November, Vancouver's new-housing-price index had increased 6.4 per cent.

To the end of November, Metro Vancouver builders had taken out \$6.45 billion worth of building permits, a 4.7 per cent increase from the first 11 months of 2006.

Provincewide, builders took out a total of \$901 million worth of building permits in November, with a 6.5-per cent increase in non-residential permits to \$290.5 million, offsetting some of the residential decline.

To the end of November, municipalities had issued \$11.5 billion worth of building permits, a 71-per cent increase from the first 11 months of 2006.

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Organizers say this year's sex show has something for everyone

BY GILLIAN SHAW
VANCOUVER SUN

The Taboo Naughty But Nice Sex Show started Thursday and runs through Sunday at the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre.

The annual show, which features sexologist Trina Read and exhibitors ranging from Above the Bra Creations to Nadia's Naughty Chocolates, is in its seventh year.

More than 50,000 people attended last year's show and organizers say this year the show has grown and will have

more than 200 exhibits. "We've added a third hall to the show this year; we are about a third bigger in size with probably 20 per cent more exhibits," said show director Darryl Rossengreen. "Whatever is sexy or romantic and everything and anything under that umbrella."

Rossengreen said many exhibitors have been taking part every year since the show began.

"It has something for everyone, things that are kind of softer and things that are a little bit edgier," he said. "We always just try to promote it is all about fun

and it is a good time. "It is a very unique event."

Based on exit surveys, organizers say:

■ 73 per cent of attendees attended as couples.

■ 55 per cent of couples were married.

■ 62 per cent of show visitors own their home.

■ 61 cent of attendees are female.

■ 37 is the average age of attendees.

For details and ticket information, including online discounted tickets, check the Web at taboosexshow.com



IAN LINDSAY/VANCOUVER SUN

Hair and makeup expert Lee McAvoy offers a makeover followed by glamour photography.

Permits dip

The value of building permits issued in November dropped compared with October, largely because there were fewer big multi-family projects approved.

Metro Vancouver building permits			
October	November		year-to-date
\$669 million	\$446 million -33%		\$6.5 billion +5%
British Columbia building permits			
October	November		year-to-date
\$1.1 billion	\$902 million -20%		\$11.5 billion +7%

Source: Statistics Canada



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