

Boise stops use of fibre from disputed Whiskey Jack

An American paper company has decided to stop using wood fibre from the Whiskey Jack forest that has been the subject of a long-standing dispute for Grassy Narrows First Nation.

By The Canadian Press
Friday February 29, 2008

TORONTO - An American paper company has decided to stop using wood fibre from the Whiskey Jack forest that has been the subject of a long-standing dispute for Grassy Narrows First Nation. The decision by Boise Inc. was hailed Thursday by aboriginals and environmentalists.

The plan to stop buying material from Montreal-based forestry company AbitibiBowater was announced in a letter from Steven Earley, Boise's woodlands manager in International Falls, Minn.

"In support of the ongoing dialogue, out of respect for the Grassy Narrows community and their leadership, Boise wishes to honour the request of Chief (Simon) Fobister to discontinue sourcing fibre from the traditional use area of Grassy Narrows," Earley said.

Earley refused to comment on the letter, which was sent Wednesday to the SmartWood Program, an independent wood-source certifier in the U.S.

Roberta Keesick, with the Grassy Narrows First Nation, praised Boise's move.

"We've been getting a lot of support from environmentalists and now these companies are backing us up," Keesick said.
"I'm glad that we've got that backup -- it's very powerful."

Boise's moratorium puts further pressure on the Ontario government, which licenses the logging

activity, as well as AbitibiBowater and forestry giant Weyerhaeuser Co.

Last summer, the province put in place a confidential mediation effort under former Supreme Court of Canada justice Frank Iacobucci in an effort to resolve the dispute.

Fobister has previously expressed his people's dismay at the widespread logging, saying it was threatening the environment and the very survival of his community.

"Our fundamental ability to traditionally harvest to feed and support our families, as we have for millennia, is being jeopardized," Fobister said last year.

In a report last fall, Amnesty said the Grassy Narrows First Nation had suffered repeated human-rights violations and called on the province to respect a proposed moratorium on logging. The current licence is held by Idaho-based Boise, which manufactures a wide range of specialty and premium paper products and well as containerboard and corrugated products. At one time it owned the Kenora paper mill, a local sawmill and held the forest management licence for the region including harvesting in the forest area in dispute. It spunoff its Northwestern Ontario operations in the early 1990s, which were eventually acquired by Abitibi.

Weyerhaeuser still targeted

Environmentalists from the Rainforest Action Network also issued a release Thursday, in which they said they had been involved in public demonstrations at OfficeMax and Grand&Toy, who have been major purchasers of Boise paper products, in order to encourage support for the people of Grassy Narrows.

The group has also been involved in roadblocks and demonstrations in the Kenora area. The network's press release noted Weyerhaeuser was AbitibiBowater's highest-profile buyer of wood from the traditional lands near Grassy Narrows.

Residents from the First Nation have been engaged in demonstrations against Weyerhaeuser, including trips to Seattle. Weyerhaeuser's local plant, iLevel, is currently running at half capacity and its payroll is down about 60 workers to about 160 from last January.

Earlier in the month, representatives told city councillors in Kenora they continued to need support from governments, in an effort to stay competitive in a tough market.

The iLevel mill is the last of four local wood products mills still in operation, following the shutdowns at Devlin, Abitibi and the indefinite idling of Kenora Forest Products, as the forestry crisis continues.