

SAR Act misguided, foresters say

By Nate Smelle

Peter Nitschke of the Bancroft Forestry Industry Association and Lou Freymond of Freymond Lumber Ltd. presented to Bancroft council during their meeting in Dungannon Aug. 23. The presentation was regarding an emergency motion calling for an additional five-year extension to the forest industry's exemption from the Endangered Species Act; and for a two-year exemption from the new Species At Risk guide by the Government of Ontario. Nitschke and Freymond took turns explaining to council why they feel the updated prescriptions for 28 species at risk defined in the updated SAR guide would "shut down mills" in the far north and damage the economies of communities throughout the province, fueled by the forestry industry.

"There are a lot of communities that are highly dependent on the forestry industry where the mill is the reason the town exists," said Nitschke.

He explained that the reason the Ontario Forestry Industry Association brought the motion to council was because forest practitioners had issues with how the legislation affects the industry. Nitschke asserted that the prescriptions designated within the SAR guide showed a lack of understanding. One of the reasons for this, he said, was because there was very little involvement with aboriginal communities and municipalities throughout the process of putting the guide together.

"Some of [the rules], in our opinion, were quite frankly contrary to science, or at least not supported by science," he said.

"The direction was very rigid. It wasn't recognizing all the risks to the species and the things that really imperil species at risk. As an example, the big risk for turtles is roadkill and the pet trade."

Because the ESA and Species At Risk Act focus on the recovery of individual species, Nitschke sees the legislation as missing the big picture when it comes to forest management. He maintains that the protective measures in place for species at risk such as the Blanding's turtle and the woodland caribou in northern Ontario under the ESA and SARA are particularly harmful to the forest industry.

"Down here of course we don't have caribou, we've got turtles - turtles are our caribou," Nitschke said. "We're not dealing with prohibitions against logging, we're mostly dealing with timing restrictions. We're dealing with time restrictions, but we don't have good inventories of where these species are. We don't have the tools to assess what the impact and cost to the wood supply is from these timing restrictions, so it comes down to judgment. It's a lot harder to quantify, so the effects we are seeing are much more insidious."

A high percentage of the local harvest area is under timing restrictions. Freymond added that such restrictions are not always the best for the environment.

"If you're in there when they tell you that you can go because you might not be hurting a species at risk at the time, you're hurting something else. That's the sad part."

Over the past 30 years, Freymond said while on the job he has never seen a turtle killed or injured. He said he'd seen "tons of Blanding's turtles" in the forest throughout his career. He questioned whether the species deserves to be listed as a threatened. Both Nitschke and Freymond told council that they believe the ESA and SARA are redundant because species at risk are already protected under the Crown Forest Sustainability Act. They feel the CFSA is a more effective piece of legislation because it also takes into consideration the social and economic impacts of protecting species at risk and environment.

Before council could vote on whether to support the suggested motion, acting mayor Paul Jenkins announced that the provincial government had promised to delay the posting of the draft SAR guide at the recent Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference.