

Grits aren't spending enough to combat budworm: Tory MLA

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FREDERICTON • A Progressive Conservative MLA says the Liberal government isn't spending enough to combat the looming threat of a spruce budworm infestation that he estimates will cost hundreds of millions of dollars to fix.

The provincial Liberals have earmarked roughly \$2 million in its budget to fight the bug that has already swarmed into northwestern New Brunswick.

Tory Resource Development critic Ross Wetmore said during the departmental estimates process this week at the provincial legislature that the commitment is "chump change."

Natural Resources Minister Rick Doucet shot back, accusing Wetmore of fearmongering, while pointing to a plan in the year ahead to strategically target 150,000 hectares of land with an insecticide treatment.

That's up from 60,000 hectares a year ago.

"It's maybe quite a big acreage, but that's like peeing on a forest fire," Wetmore said, insisting the Liberal government must do more.

Meanwhile, the Healthy Forest Partnership, a consortium of forestry businesses, government and academics working to prevent spruce budworm populations says an uncontrolled outbreak in New Brunswick will result in a 25 per cent decrease in the provincial wood supply over 40 years.

That would result in a \$6.7-billion loss to the New Brunswick economy and the loss of 1,900 jobs every year.

Asked if government is doing enough, Doucet said "personally, I think we are."

"I think we're staying out in front of it," he said. "If it needs an inflow as quickly as possible, we're going to make it happen.

"We're just hoping we won't have to be treating 300,000 or 400,000 hectares next year."

The spruce budworm is native to much of North America.

It turns into a moth, but while it is still at the larval or caterpillar stage, it eats needles off conifers, mainly fir and spruce.

There is currently a large outbreak in neighbouring Quebec, where over six million hectares are affected.

A massive swarm of millions of moths then crossed the border into New Brunswick last July, a grouping so large that an Environment Canada radar map actually mistook the bugs for snow.

The moths were visible in the Campbellton-Dalhousie area, particularly at a car dealership in Campbellton where heaps of the dead moths attracted by the bright lights littered the ground the next day.

Prior to the July swarm, researchers had been working with an \$18-million grant from government and industry in so-called "hot spots" in Restigouche County, where numbers of the larvae were high enough to warrant concern that a much larger outbreak could occur.

About 60,000 hectares of forest in the north was targeted with anti-budworm biological treatments. Two products being used, Btk, which is used in organic farming, and Mimic, which imitates sex pheromones, are proving effective at limiting budworm populations.

The Progressive Conservatives are questioning whether current efforts are enough.

"We have an infestation of budworm right at the Quebec border and this is probably going to be a \$300- or \$400-million fix," Wetmore said later outside of the legislative chamber.

"The government knows it.

"These are numbers that have been put together by industry, it's been put together by other governments, it just hasn't been brought out. So \$2 million? It's chump change, and New Brunswick has the most to lose with the budworm."

He added: "This is a real problem and we've got to make sure that it's dealt with and \$2 million is nowhere near enough."

Asked if the cost could be upwards of \$300 million to adequately fight the bug, Doucet said "no."

"This is huge," Doucet said. "Without a doubt we have some concerns.

"Going forward we're not sure what the number will be, but we want to stay out in front of it."

He added: "It's difficult to throw out a number at it at this point in time. I think to fearmonger with the \$300 million figure, that's a significant amount of money. We have to go one step at a time. We want to make sure whatever we're doing is very strategic."

Wetmore said a combination of the provincial and federal government, as well as industry must step up.

"Budworm is not just going to stay on Crown property," he said. "It has to be a joint force working together."

Doucet said that's happening, the province leveraging its financial commitment to secure further dollars from Ottawa and the private sector.

The forestry industry in the province still employs roughly one in every 30 New Brunswickers.

It supports over 22,000 direct jobs and contributing \$250 million in annual tax revenues to the province, even in the aftermath of the most recent economic downturn that shutter mills across New Brunswick.

"We're monitoring what's taking place with the infestation that is out there right now," Doucet said. "Everyone is committed to it."

The budworm crisis: Why you should care

- A severe uncontrolled outbreak of spruce budworm in Quebec reached 4.3 million hectares in size in 2014. It grew in Quebec by two million hectares in 2015, reaching over 6.3 million hectares in size. For comparison, New Brunswick has six million hectares of forest
- In 2014, two budworm hotspots were identified in northern New Brunswick, south of Campbellton and Dalhousie, and along the northern New Brunswick-Quebec border
- An uncontrolled outbreak in New Brunswick will result in a 25 per cent decrease in the provincial wood supply over 40 years, according to a consortium of forestry businesses, government and academics working to prevent spruce budworm
- That would equate to a \$6.7-billion loss to the New Brunswick economy over that time
- It would also mean 1,900 jobs lost every year for the next 30 years, according to the consortium