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Environmental Groups Express Cautious Optimism about Government Plans for British Columbia's Coast

VANCOUVER - ForestEthics, Greenpeace, Rainforest Action Network (RAN) and the Sierra Club of British Columbia are cautiously optimistic about Sustainable Resource Management Minister Stan Hagen's announcement endorsing the Central Coast Land Use Planning Table Phase 1 decision, and completing land-use planning for the central and north coasts. The BC coastal region, known as the Great Bear Rainforest, includes dozens of pristine valleys and lush ancient temperate rainforests, and is home to some of the most biologically unique and rich mix of plants and animals on the planet, including grizzlies, salmon, Kermode "spirit" bears, wolves and giant trees.

On April 4, 2001—after years of intense negotiations—environmental groups, First Nations, coastal communities, logging companies, forest workers and the provincial government together endorsed an historic agreement that established the framework for what could become one of the largest conservation initiatives in North America. Phase 1 included the proposed protection of a total of 603,000 hectares on the central coast, outlined a framework for developing a locally administered, ecosystem-based approach to planning, and detailed a protocol between coastal First Nations and the provincial government concerning land-use planning and interim measures.

"Today the government has renewed its commitment to move forward to ensure greater conservation of British Columbia's rainforests and sustainability of coastal communities," stated Merran Smith, Director of the BC Coastal Program for ForestEthics. "We have outstanding concerns about the process as currently designed. However, we are hopeful that the process will be transparent, scientifically rigorous and stand up to international scrutiny, as well as continuing the conservation and sustainability initiative that all parties have been working on."

Customers in the United States, Europe and Japan, who collectively purchase more than \$2 billion worth of BC forest products each year, have made strong statements in support of conservation of endangered forests and the move toward ecologically based logging. They include Home Depot, IKEA, Lowe's and the Mitsubishi Corporation of Japan.

"Customers around the world are keeping a close eye on the BC coast and expect this government to follow through on the consensus agreement announced in April," said Catherine Stewart of Greenpeace. "But the government can still maintain the confidence of the global marketplace if it acts quickly to legislate protection for the 20 areas agreed to in the first phase of the Central Coast LRMP."

The environmental groups are pleased to be part of establishing the Coast Information Team, an independent, multi-disciplinary group of experts who will provide analysis to help implement ecosystem-based planning for the coast.

"Current scientific information reveals that there are serious threats to the long-term viability of many species on the coast," said Bill Wareham, executive director of the Sierra Club of British Columbia. "So we are encouraged that the government has committed to establishing an independent science team that will further advise the Central Coast land use process. However, we want the government to ensure that the planning process incorporates recommendations from this independent science team."

Government's own analysis has shown that long-term industrial forestry at the current scale is likely not viable in this region, and economic diversification is the key to healthy communities.

Forest Ethics, Greenpeace, RAN and the Sierra Club are announcing five key benchmarks to gauge progress on the central coast and adherence to the April 4, 2001 consensus agreement:

Benchmark 1: Have the protection areas agreed to in the provincial government's April 4 announcement been formalized through Orders in Council?

Benchmark 2: Does the Coast Information Team have an arms-length standing from all parties? Will the land-use planning tables have adequate time to incorporate the Coast Information Team recommendations in their decision making?

Benchmark 3: Is the team evaluating regional economic options for BC's rainforests, in addition to logging?

Benchmark 4: Has the government reduced the rate of logging in the immediate term, taking into account new protected areas and deferrals to ensure that logging pressure is not transferred to other sensitive areas while planning continues?

Benchmark 5: Are there transition funds and plans for communities, workers and contractors to adapt to change?

The environmental groups will be monitoring the process closely, keeping the BC public and the international marketplace fully informed of new developments.

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