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MARKETPLACE - Budget should protect forestry jobs: Poll

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LOCAL MARKETPLACE - Budget should protect forestry jobs: Poll

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Posted 5 days ago

A poll released last week shows that a majority of Canadians believe that the federal budget due to be unveiled on Jan. 27 should include measures to protect forestry jobs.

The Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) poll, conducted by Nanos Research, found that 72 per cent of respondents had some level of support for provincial and federal stimulus programs.

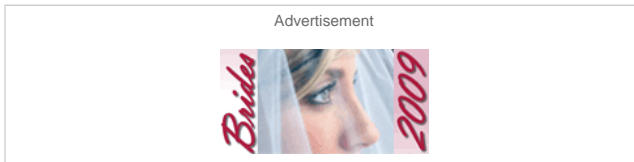
"There's a recognition in Canada that it's not just about Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, that smaller communities like Grande Prairie are very dependent on the forestry sector and people believe that the federal government, at least, should pinch in and try to ensure that we make some stability in the forest industry and in fact to grow the industry," CEP president Dave Coles said.

Of the 1,003 respondents, 66 per cent from western provinces said they were in favour of protecting forestry. Quebec registered the highest support from respondents, at 85 per cent.

"Overall, I think, we would have expected Westerners to say 'no, we don't want more government intervention. We do not want direct government help in the sectors. Let the market forces work it out, let the economy figure it out.' You sort of would have expected to see, I think, a more marked difference between Westerners and Quebecers. But the difference really isn't that significant," said Anthony Salloum, program director at the Rideau Institute, an Ottawa-based, non-partisan, not-for-profit research institute.

The federal government is prohibited under provisions in the 2006 softwood lumber deal between Canada and the U.S., from offering direct money to bail out the forestry sector.

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Instead, the Forest Products Association of Canada (FPAC) has highlighted five priorities for the government to tackle: Ensure forest manufacturers have ready access to credit; tax incentives for investment and innovation; investment in research and innovation; market development and product promotion; help moving to bio-energy; and extending the Employment Insurance Work-Sharing Program.

In a second poll question, 90 per cent of respondents agreed that any form of stimulus programs in the budget should come with pre-conditions that the companies implement measures to maintain operations and prevent layoffs.

"What the second poll says, overwhelmingly, by a ratio of 9-to-1 essentially, is that don't give money without there being a commitment without there being a direct benefits to jobs," Salloum said. "In other words, that money has got to trickle down to either sustaining the jobs that are there, or protecting ones, or preventing layoffs."

As for what sort of stimulus program will actually be in the budget, Salloum suggests that rather than tax cuts, loan guarantees for forestry companies is the best course of action.

"There is an expectation that forestry will be one of the targeted sectors for help from the government, but at the end of the day, we're all just anxiously awaiting to see the balance between the extent of the direct economic stimulus on the part of the government through, for example loan guarantees or expenditures on the part of government, and whether

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there's going to be a significant amount of tax cuts," he said.

Whatever is in there, Coles said, it should be something that forestry companies can use to see tangible results.

"This is no time to be playing silly politics, it's time to try to find out how to stop this thing from spiraling out of control," he said.

The results of the poll were obtained through a random telephone survey of 1,003 Canadians from Jan. 3 to Jan. 7. The margin of error is 3.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

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