

Sawmill contract talks set to resume next week

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Negotiations between sawmill workers and a group of companies that includes the Dunkley, Carrier and Lakeland mills plan to continue talks next week in Prince George.

The negotiations had resumed this week after the two sides reached an impasse last month and halted discussions for several weeks. The impasse had ended the only bargaining underway with the United Steelworkers union representing 10,000 forest workers in the Interior.

"We're still bargaining. It's a slow process, but we are still at it," United Steelworkers official Bob Matters said Thursday.

Forest companies are looking for labour concessions to combat the financial fallout from an unprecedented downturn led by a collapse in U.S. housing. The collapse has been exacerbated by a rising Canadian dollar and a 15 per cent export on lumber shipments to the U.S.

Matter said they continue to hammer away at the labour issue.

The union is trying to get an agreement with the Council on Northern Interior Forest Employment Relations (CONIFER) -- which ended June 30 -- before moving on to other contract negotiations with companies like West Fraser and Canfor.

CONIFER executive director Mike Bryce also said the pace of bargaining is slow due to the complexity and difficulty of the issues. "From our perspective there seems to be a sincere effort to understand and respond to each respective proposals," said Bryce.

CONIFER represents 15 mills in the Northern Interior - also including Conifex, Pacific BioEnergy, Tolko and Hampton Affiliates - employing about 3,000 workers in normal market conditions.

The forest downturn has had wide-spread impacts on communities in northern B.C.

More than 3,500 forest workers have lost their jobs in northern B.C. in the past two years as companies have shut down mills indefinitely, cut shifts and reduced work weeks. Forest industry analysts don't expect the forest sector to start to see a slow turnaround until 2010.

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