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PRINCE GEORGE, BRITISH COLUMBIA--(Marketwire - Aug. 19, 2009) - The Council on Northern Interior Forest Employment Relations (CONIFER) has taken a "time out" in its talks with the United Steelworkers of America on a new collective agreement.

"We began negotiations on June 11th and devoted our initial discussions to key USW agenda items," says Mike Bryce, CONIFER'S Executive Director. "We were able to agree to an important seniority retention item the union advanced. Our expectation was that in return they would devote a similar level of attention to our most important issue."

"Unfortunately, the union leadership essentially said yesterday that they had no interest in discussing our need to reduce our labour costs," says Bryce. "Until they are willing to face up to the reality of a severely depressed market and an industry that is fighting for survival, we will not resume negotiations."

"Let's be clear," says Bryce. "Right now our mills pay \$40 per hour in wages and benefits to our hourly employees. Our collective failure to bring this number down will spell the most serious trouble for our members and the communities in which they operate."

"We are all hoping for an economic recovery and for a clear and strong turnaround in the lumber market. Neither is here yet. We urge the USW to focus on this reality and to return to the table with an open mind and a commitment to an agreement that puts the industry and their members on a stronger and more sustainable long-term track."

The previous collective agreement expired on June 30th. CONIFER represents 15 mills in the northern Interior of BC. All told these mills employ about 3000 people in normal market conditions.

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