

# Historic agreement aims to foster improved relations among forestry and Indigenous band

BY Simon Ducatel, MVP Staff

**SUNDRE** – A good relations agreement hailed as historic by its signatories is intended to forge mutually beneficial ties between West Fraser Mills and Montana First Nation.

Representatives from West Fraser met with members of the band council on Aug. 21 at Sundre Forest Products to sign the agreement in front of a teepee that had been purchased from Montana First Nation for the ceremony.

Chief Leonard Standing on the Road, who is also the Grand Chief of Confederacy of Treaty 6, offered a prayer followed by a traditional smudge by all the agreement signatories before the document was signed.

Also attending were many adolescents from the band, who were provided with a tour of the mill operation in Sundre, as well as elders and business leaders.

“We’ve been talking to Montana First Nation for a couple of years through the consultation program that we have on our forest management area,” said Tom Daniels, Sundre Forest Products woods manager, when asked how the agreement came to fruition.

Throughout the course of those conversations, Daniels, who was among those present for the signing ceremony, said the matter of economic opportunities would inevitably arise, leading to follow-up discussions about employment and what that would require.

“And from that, the feeling was mutual that we should try to put an agreement together just so that we’ve got a basis for how we’re going to work together and support each other,” Daniels said on Aug. 29 during an interview.

Responding to a question about



From left: Bob Jackle, general manager for West Fraser LVL; Adam Schneidmiller, Alberta Indigenous Relations superintendent; Tom Daniels, Sundre Forest Products woods manager; Jason Foote, Sundre Forest Products general manager; Montana First Nation Chief Leonard Standing on the Road and councillors Chase McDougall, Brad Rabbit and Carol Rabbit. A good relations agreement hailed as historic that was signed on Aug. 21 is intended to forge mutually beneficial ties between West Fraser Mills and Montana First Nation while opening the door to closer cooperation.

Submitted photo

whether West Fraser might be pursuing similar agreements with other any other Alberta-based First Nations, he said, “We’ve got conversations going on with several other bands across the region. It just so happened that we were able to get an agreement with Montana quicker than the other ones.”

So, discussions remain ongoing and West Fraser is hoping to sign similar agreements with different bands, he said, adding each community requires special consideration and that there’s no template, one-size-fits-all approach.

Although Daniels said it’s a little early on in this new agreement to be able to say what kinds of ancestral knowledge

and wisdom West Fraser has been able to put to use, he was nevertheless able to offer some insight.

“For example, we’ve gone out with people from the community and they’ve identified important areas for them for a variety of different reasons,” he said.

“It could be that they’re spiritual areas they may hold sacred because of spiritual nature of that area, or it could be berry picking or hunting areas; areas they traditionally camp,” he elaborated.

“Gravesites would be another. Certainly there’s lots of First Nation people that have been buried out there over the years,” he said, emphasizing the importance of not only identifying

but especially respecting such sites.

“We want to make sure that if we know where it is, that we can put the appropriate protection around a site like that,” he said. “The last thing we want to do is trod upon somebody’s gravesite.”

Sharing some thoughts on what the agreement might mean not only for West Fraser but also other First Nations as well as Alberta forests, he spoke optimistically about employment opportunities and added some of the youth from Montana First Nation seemed interested in potentially pursuing careers paths in forestry.

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Young adults from Montana First Nation were offered a tour of the Sundre Forest Products' mill operation on Aug. 21 during a signing ceremony to make official what was hailed as a historic good relations agreement between West Fraser Mills and the Alberta-based band.

*Submitted photo*

"One of the things that we've talked about is that we've got an internship program, so we'll hire people from the various First Nation communities and give them exposure to a mill environment or to working on the wood side to get a better understanding of what kind of opportunity there might be, and hopefully something will click with them," he said, adding a high school diploma is enough to get an interested youth through the doors to work in the mill.

"We'll do the training at the facility here," he said.

There is already a number of West Fraser employees on the payroll with Indigenous roots of some kind, he said, adding the company does not pry about private matters but that indi-

viduals who are so inclined to share their backgrounds are welcome to.

Offering some parting thoughts, Daniels wanted to extend some praise on the attentive adolescents who participated.

"For me, it was really, really cool to see the number of youth that came, and how engaged they were," he said.

"I've had other sessions with youth...where you can't get them to get their face out of their phones. In this case, the young adults were very engaged, very interested," he said.

"They asked lots and lots of questions," he said, citing as examples queries about the kind of experience they'd need to get a job as well as matters pertaining to forest management practices.

"In my mind, it was a really great day to spend time with them," he said.

Coun. Brad Rabbit, who was among the band's council members present for the signing ceremony, expressed a deep respect both for West Fraser as well as the relationship the company has endeavoured to develop with Montana First Nation.

"It is very important for industry to be able to understand the dynamics of a First Nation in order to be effective in providing services and building relationships with stakeholders, including First Nations," Rabbit told the *Albertan*.

"Understanding one another in our roles and our responsibilities, is very key in developing relations. And sometimes we have to go over and above our mutual responsibilities to be able to achieve that by creating these relationships," he said.

"At the end of the day, building a relationship and having an understanding of one another creates a positive environment for both parties to be able to move forward."

The fruit such efforts can yield might be either economic or social in nature, he added.

Asked if he felt Montana First Nation's contributions throughout West Fraser's consultation process were not only taken into consideration but also reflected in the final agreement, he said yes and described the process as "very respectful" and "hands-on."

"This is one of the only projects that I've ever publicly supported in the area of consultation with First Nations," he said. "We were able to see what they were doing."

There's also far more to logging than

meets the eye, he said.

"You know, going out there and harvesting trees is not just about going out there and having to cut down the landscape," he said.

"There's reclamation and remediation that's involved, which is something that we have a natural responsibility as First Nations," he said, referring to the importance of implementing a stewards-of-the-land mentality.

"West Fraser has demonstrated that they have that responsibility as well," he said.

Grassroots understandings and agreements also go much farther toward developing meaningful plans than top-down regulations passed by higher levels of government, he added.

"Instead of having policy and legislation dictate what we're doing, it creates a healthier environment. That understanding and respect is so key, and I'm feeling pretty good about it as a result. We worked together to achieve something. When you work collectively, that's much easier to achieve great things," he said.

Having previously spent many years on consultations, he said government policy and legislation don't always work when it comes to First Nations and those with Indigenous backgrounds.

"And when there's a willingness with two parties to be able to work together to be able to achieve a common goal, respecting the needs and understanding the ways of each other's responsibilities, then we can do big things," he said.

"These type of relationships, all industry partners can learn from them."