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Wacky weather wake-up call on climate change: federal environment minister

STEPHANIE LEVITZ
 Monday, January 08, 2007

VANCOUVER (CP) - The devastation in Stanley Park and the wacky weather across Canada is a wake-up call for Canadians on the potential dangers of climate change, Federal Environment Minister John Baird said Monday.

Baird took a guided tour of the park, his first major outing since being appointed environment minister last week. "We've had unusually warm weather in parts of the country and unusually harsh weather in other parts of the country and I wanted to come out first hand and see it," he said.

"It's demonstrably worse than anything you can see on television and it's a wake-up call."

Baird said Canada has been slow off the mark in dealing with climate change, accusing new Liberal Leader Stephane Dion of doing nothing about it in his time as cabinet minister.

"We are sort of behind the 8-ball in that the starting pistol went off 10 years ago when Kyoto was negotiated but the challenge for us is to play catch-up," he said.

Baird said Canadians' priorities have changed since the Conservative government took power and they are now ready for action on climate change.

After he was moved into the Environment Ministry, Baird said his first priority would be to get the Clean Air Act passed in Parliament.

He also said the government was preparing to go further in addressing global warming and climate change than it had initially outlined last year.

"Our government believes Canadians expect leadership from the federal government and we want to give that," Baird said.

"This problem demands a solution that will involve not only the federal government, but other governments, it will involve every sector of the economy and it will involve every Canadian."

As he surveyed the massive trees felled in Stanley Park by heavy windstorms, Baird called the damage absolutely devastating.

Natural Resources Minister Gary Lunn, who was on the tour with Baird and Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan, said the federal government will step in to provide assistance to rehabilitate the park.

"Obviously it's far too early to get into numbers but we'll be there and be supportive," Lunn said.

Park officials have not yet put a dollar figure on the amount of damage caused to the park.

Park board chairman Ian Robertson said crews are still working to clear the trees and paths so the entire park can reopen.

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Of major concern is the state of the 8.8-kilometre seawall that surrounds the entire park. Parts of it were badly damaged in the storm, with some sections sliding right off and into the water.

There's also been no decision on what to do with the untold amount of lumber strewn by the storm.

Some have argued it should be left alone to become part of the park's landscape while others have suggested the lumber be sold to cover the cost of restoration.

Robertson said he is pleased the government will support restoration.

"I think it was a very good sign that the minister was only sworn in last week and his first major trip was out here to assess the damage," Robertson said. "The fact that he's here and has publicly acknowledged that there would be support is a very good sign."

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