

Sustainable timber challenged

By Marcelene Edwards

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A native tribe from Canada is challenging Weyerhaeuser's environmental commitment and presenting a member as a candidate to the company's board of directors.



PHOTO: JANET JENSEN/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Bonnie Swain of the Grassy Narrows Band, a First Nation tribe in Ontario, Canada, visits the Quadrant Homes development Tuesday in Federal Way with members of the Rainforest Action Network. The two groups are protesting Weyerhaeuser's use of the label "green" builder.

Several members of the Grassy Narrows First Nation traveled from Ontario this week to attend the Federal Way-based company's annual meeting Thursday and question executives about Weyerhaeuser's business practices.

Band members, with the backing of the environmental activist group Rainforest Action Network, say the company is making lumber out of trees taken from Grassy Narrows land in Ontario. The tribe does not have legal claim to the land but would like the Canadian government to set up protections for the forest.

Rainforest Action Network followed the wood harvested from the disputed land to houses built by Weyerhaeuser subsidiary Quadrant in Federal Way and around the Puget Sound area.

The Rainforest Action Network wants Weyerhaeuser to stop buying logs from the disputed land.

Weyerhaeuser buys wood from a company that has a government license to log the Grassy Narrows land. That wood is processed and transformed into lumber used to build stairs and other parts of a house.

Weyerhaeuser spokesman Frank Mendizabal said Tuesday that the company's products and houses are made with wood certified as coming from sustainably managed forests.

"Quadrant and Weyerhaeuser stand behind the 'Built Green' designation," Mendizabal said.

Tuesday afternoon, Bonnie Swain, a Grassy Narrows member and nominee to the board, visited a subdivision in Federal Way built by Quadrant. As she toured the neighborhood filled with new homes, she saw stacks of wood made from aspen, poplar and birch trees that surround her village in Canada.

“I am walking through my forests right now,” she said.

RAN members representing many Weyerhaeuser shareholders nominated Swain to the board in a symbolic gesture to bring attention to the movement.

The Grassy Narrows cause is the latest for the Rainforest Action Network, which has called on Weyerhaeuser to improve its environmental policies.

RAN and Weyerhaeuser have been talking for several years and continue to meet.

Last year, RAN brought members of the Haida Nation in British Columbia to Weyerhaeuser’s annual meeting to highlight another land dispute in Canada.

Weyerhaeuser’s annual meeting was cut short when protesters – including members of RAN and the Haida – began shouting at CEO Steve Rogel during a question-and-answer period.

Part of the disagreement stemmed from a change in the company’s rules surrounding the public comment period at the meeting. In past years, Weyerhaeuser allowed shareholders to address the board and ask members questions. Last year, shareholders submitted questions on cards that were read aloud and answered by company executives.

Company representatives said after last year’s meeting that the new rules didn’t work out. This year, shareholders again will be able to ask questions during the public comment session.

Rainforest Action Network also sent letters to Weyerhaeuser’s top 100 investors encouraging them to vote for shareholder resolutions including changing the environmental certification process for its forestlands in the United States and Canada.

Part of the dispute between RAN and Weyerhaeuser is over the type of environment certification the company uses for its forest lands. The type of certification that RAN supports calls for permission to use wood from native lands.

“We think that the certification systems we have in place that say our wood comes from sustainably managed processes are sufficient,” Mendizabal said.

What: Annual meeting, Weyerhaeuser Co.

Where: Company headquarters, Federal Way

When: 9 a.m. Thursday

Who can attend: Shareholders of the company

Agenda: CEO Steve Rogel will summarize company progress; shareholders will vote on some initiatives and board candidates.