

Controversial bills passed into law

BY ANGELA HALL, LEADER-POST MAY 20, 2010

New labour legislation for the construction industry passed into law Wednesday after months of heated debate and public protests by unionized workers.

The Saskatchewan Party government also ended the contentious debate on another piece of legislation by passing amendments to the Wildlife Habitat Protection Act.

Both bills -- which passed on the second last day of the spring legislative session -- faced fierce criticism from some interest groups and the Opposition NDP.

But Labour Minister Rob Norris called the construction legislation, known as Bill 80, a "winning combination" for the province.

The new law eliminates the requirement that unionized workers in the construction sector must join the union specific to their trade or craft and allows for "wall-to-wall" certification of a workplace. It also opens the door to unions not currently able to organize in Saskatchewan's construction sector, such as the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union and the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC).

"It's going to provide greater choice for the working people of this sector. It's also going to ensure that we have greater competition, thereby helping to ensure that we're maximizing taxpayer dollars," Norris said.

The government said Bill 80 also clarifies provisions around "abandonment" where a union no longer represents a workplace.

Representatives of business groups who came to the legislature to see the bill's passage applauded the changes, with Saskatchewan Construction Association president Michael Fougere thanking the government for its "political courage."

"This is groundbreaking legislation. What we see is a monopoly that will be disbanded ... this is for more competition within the building trades industry and that's a good thing for everyone," Fougere told reporters.

However, construction unions in Saskatchewan say the bill will set up parallel systems, hurt wages and allow employers to foist unions of their choice of employees.

"This is a sad day in history for construction workers across the province," said Terry Parker, business manager for the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council.

Parker called the consultation process on Bill 80 a "sham," saying a written report from the legislative committee that held hearings on the legislation was never made public.

The amendments to the province's Wildlife Habitat Protection Act (WHPA) also stirred controversy, with conservation groups and First Nations leaders among those concerned that the changes will allow for the sale of some protected land with no strings attached.

Further parcels of land will be sold to ranchers who currently lease the Crown land for grazing, but a conservation easement will stipulate how the private owner can use the land in the future.

Environment Minister Nancy Heppner rejected a call from the NDP to delay passage of the bill and said despite opposition there are also many people who support the changes.

"We believe in this bill. We believe what it stands for is that people in this province can own land and make sure the conservation values of that land are maintained going forward," Heppner said.

She said the government has made some adjustments to address concerns, and will establish an advisory committee that will help guide future decisions about Crown land.

For example, the committee would be consulted if there is an application to remove a conservation easement from a piece of land, Heppner said.

The government also plans to introduce a change in a future session so that the lands remaining under the protection of the act are listed in legislation. Critics have said that listing the protected land in regulations that accompany the legislation isn't adequate because regulations can be changed without public scrutiny.