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Harper feels heat on softwood

CanWest News Service

Tuesday, June 13, 2006

OTTAWA -- Prime Minister Stephen Harper said Monday his softwood lumber agreement, now being challenged by a growing number of forestry firms, is still backed by provincial governments and the "vast majority" of Canadian industry executives.

He was responding to opposition allegations the Tory government, which was pressuring the Canadian industry on the weekend to strike a deal, is trying to ram through an unpopular accord to appease his "American idol" -- President George W. Bush.

Harper's statement drew a rebuke from one industry spokesman.

"I think that might precipitate some phone calls for him," said B.C. sawmiller David Gray, co-chair of the Free Trade Lumber Council. "The vast majority may have supported his announcement on April 27, but as we get to see more of the details, people are rethinking that. I think it would be a good idea if he were to get in touch with the industry, because I think they are having second thoughts at this point."

To express their concerns, at least 80 Canadian lumber companies filed suits in a U.S. Court of International Trade case over the last two weeks. As no deal can be ratified unless all suits are withdrawn, companies say they are protecting their interests should Canada sign a deal they do not support.

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