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Abstract: Focuses on the effect of building a paper mill in Grande Prairie, Canada. What Grande Prairie is known for; Impact of increased timber in Grande Prairie; Number of jobs the paper mill would provide; Results of a study on pollution conducted by the Alberta government; Where the greatest contamination was found; Largest forestry company operating in Grande Prairie.

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CANADA'S ONCE-PRISTINE NORTH TRIES TO CURB PAPER MILLS' WASTE

Dateline: GRANDE PRAIRIE, ALBERTA

Drive northwest of Edmonton, Alberta's provincial capital, and there isn't a single traffic light or stop sign for more than 600 miles, just rolling fields and forest as far as the eye can see.

At the end of this highway is Grande Prairie, the "Forestry Capital of Canada." This small city is in the midst of its second boom in only a decade. In the 1980s the boom was in oil and gas. Now it's timber.

Just over two decades ago, the first area pulp mill was built by Procter & Gamble. Today almost every major forestry company is here on the region's two river systems, the Peace and the Athabasca.

Now a plan to build another mill is raising questions about the effect of the boom on Alberta's once-pristine northern environment, its native people, and one of the world's largest freshwater delta areas.

In September, the provincial government approved plans to build a \$662-million paper mill at Grande Prairie. The mill, which would create almost 300 jobs, would produce glossy paper. The proposal must still undergo an official environmental impact assessment and review.

According to Alberta's Environmental Protection Minister Ty Lund, the region has enough timber for the project. Government estimates show that less than 40 percent of annual

growth was cut in 1995. The timber is on federal land. But perhaps more contentious than the question of timber supply is the mill's planned location - on the Wapiti and Smoky Rivers systems.

Earlier this year, the Alberta government released a study on pollution in the area, including the Peace and Athabasca Rivers. It recommended immediate limits on pollution from pulp mills.

The greatest contamination was found in the Wapiti and Smoky Rivers, tributaries of the Peace River. In some areas downstream, the fish are considered too contaminated to eat. Many of the worst-affected communities are aboriginal.

Lloyd Sunny Flett lives in the native community of Fort Chipewyan, along the western banks of Lake Athabasca, downstream from pulp mills based in Grande Prairie. "The people are concerned with all the [paper] plants that are along the Athabasca River, what it's going to do to our fish. They figure in a few more years they won't be able to eat the fish," he says.

Mr. Flett contributed to the study, interviewing several hundred aboriginal elders in 10 remote communities. He was responsible for gathering an oral history of conditions along the region's many rivers.

"It's not only fish," he says. "You talk about everything - your wildlife, your animal life... Everything just seems to be disappearing in the north.... Lake Athabasca here is one of the largest freshwater deltas in the world. We would hate... to see it disappear."

Scientists have found that the fish in the area are not reaching sexual maturity. Pollutants released by pulp mills are suspected of causing the problem.

The largest forestry company operating in Grande Prairie is Weyerhaeuser Canada, a US-owned subsidiary of the Seattle-based corporation. "The entire industry - pulp and paper industry - has done a tremendous job," says Rick Maksymetz, vice president of the company's Grande Prairie operations. He points out that the industry had responded quickly to earlier research, which showed high levels of chemicals in the river system.

Mr. Maksymetz says industry responded by dramatically reducing the levels of chemicals in pulp waste. But he acknowledges it takes time - "several years" - for such pollutants to leave the ecosystem.

He says fish deformities now being seen are due to what he calls, "Compound X."

"We're not exactly sure what's causing it. We believe it's coming from the wood itself," he adds, saying that his company believes the poor fish health is not caused by chemicals in pulp and paper production.

While there are local pollution concerns, some scientists also point to rising levels of contaminants in the wider environment. Canada's northern provinces and the Northwest Territories are particularly vulnerable to the world's pollution. All the Northern Hemisphere's waste flows north -borne by rivers, oceans and winds. And when it reaches the subarctic region, it stays there.

MAP: Showing Canada's Northwest territory, DAVE HERRING -- STAFF

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By Carol Berger, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

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