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## **PRESS RELEASE**

**For immediate Release**

DEHCHO LAND USE PLAN SURVIVES MAJOR BLOW: NORWEGIAN



DFN's chief negotiator Georges Erasmus, signs Terms of Reference and a work plan.

YELLOWKNIFE – April 27 – After almost a year of frustration and extremely slow progress in land claim negotiations, the Dehcho First Nations (DFN), Canada and the Government of the Northwest Territories Friday agreed to terms of reference and an aggressive work plan to push ahead with revising the Dehcho Land Use Plan (DLUP).

It was a victory for the Dehcho, Grand Chief Herb Norwegian said Thursday night as negotiators finalized their work. “We won more than we gave up, in fact we forced Canada to make major concessions from the tough stand they took last year when they tried to shut down the whole land use planning process.”

He also said the DFN – often painted by the two governments as intransigent – “had made concessions along the way even as governments had stonewalled progress and refused to implement the Land Use Plan after it was approved by DFN back in June, 2006.”

Three successive negotiating sessions since last December came up blank as the Federal Government adamantly refused to allow the Dehcho Land Use Planning Committee (DLUPC) to continue with its work separate from negotiations for a land claim agreement, wanting to replace the Committee with a powerless working group.

After four long days of talks in a Yellowknife hotel, the DFN's chief negotiator Georges Erasmus, and Tim Christian, Canada's chief negotiator, along with Fred Talen, GNWT chief

negotiator, signed Terms of Reference and a work plan this morning which would allow the DLUPC and staff to begin revisions under “an aggressive timetable.”

In December, Canada tried to shut down the DLUPC, claiming there was too much land in conservation zones in the Plan, rejecting the Federal-Dehcho-DFN joint committee’s unanimous report. Despite the fact that the DLUPC was created by the three parties and each had representation on the Committee, Canada refused to fund further work and demanded changes in the Committee’s makeup. Morale dropped and some professional staff resigned, leaving a small operation at the Fort Providence office.

In the last three fruitless negotiating sessions Canada’s negotiators stonewalled the DFN, claiming they had “no instructions” from Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice to continue discussing a land use plan. Instead, Canada demanded, the DFN negotiators produce, and begin negotiating, a draft land claim AiP, ignoring the DLUP.

While calling today’s signing a “big victory”, Norwegian, who has been chair of the DLUPC since its inception five years ago, was also cautious: “Sure, it’s a small step forward that took Canada so long to agree to, but the big fight is still to come because the Plan has to be revised and our people are deeply committed to it and have already approved the 2006 Plan. Now we have to go back to work again and we know Canada wants to emphasize industrial development while downplaying conservation.”

As the two levels of government slowly backedpedaled from their hardline positions to today’s agreement, Norwegian agreed it was a victory but deplored the time wasted: “It was so tedious and long. The worst thing about the last six months has been the time it took. The best thing is how far the governments, especially Canada, have moved. They have completely turned around.”

New appointments by government to the committee should be finalized today. A new chairperson will be appointed at the first meeting of the revised Committee. The three parties will provide details and rationale for zoning and conformity requirements. By the end of June, the DLUPC is to present options for revising the plan to the negotiators. This process will continue through the summer with an interim DLUP to be ready by early October.

Several long-time observers of the process attributed Canada’s change of heart to DFN refusal to negotiate the AiP before the Dehcho Land Use Plan had been resolved, despite heavy government pressure. DFN also had Assembly backing from its people and it mobilized widespread support across Canada.

Norwegian also took strongly held positions on the environment and water to supporters in the North and in southern Canada, in contrast to the federal government’s reluctance to deal with climate change.

A timeline for approval of the Plan by the DFN, GNWT and Canada has been set for the end of April, 2008. In the meantime land claims negotiations will continue.

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