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Press Release

DEHCHO ASSEMBLY APPROVES NEW NEGOTIATIONS MANDATE

KAKISA LAKE, NT, -- June 27 -- After more than six hours of intense debate, the 14th annual Dehcho First Nations Assembly gave its negotiating team a clear mandate to continue the Dehcho Process with Canada and the Government of the Northwest Territories.

The mandate was approved by a wide margin of 38-2 with no abstentions. However the negotiators were told the process must follow a strict series of events:

- Completion, approval and timely implementation of the Dehcho Land Use Plan;
- Canada must agree to “fully honor” the Interim Measures Agreement (IMA) of 2001, following which self-government negotiations begin on lands and resources to maintain a balance between conservation and economic development;
- Following these negotiations, the DFN will begin talks on other Agreement in Principle (AiP) matters, including surface and sub-surface land selection outside conservation areas; and
- The Negotiating team will develop strategies for the implementation of the jurisdiction of the Dehcho Dene in “our territory based on our understanding of the Treaties” (8 and 11).

The resolution was a compromise of a number of earlier proposals and included 11 “whereas” preamble statements. (For the complete text see the DFN website: www.dehchofirstnations.com) It was moved by Chief Keyna Norwegian of Liidlii Kue First Nation (Fort Simpson) and seconded by Margaret Ireland of Jean Marie River First Nation.

By the time the vote was called by co-chairs Margaret Thom and Raymond Sonfrere, the Assembly was nearly over and tensions were running high. Many voting delegates (chiefs, elders, and elected delegates), especially some elders, were clearly reluctant to give the negotiators a mandate for land selection. Others wanted to postpone the decision until a Special Assembly later this year.

But some of the younger chefs and delegates expressed frustration at the delays and fearful that further postponement of the decision would threaten protected areas and open the Dehcho territory to unchecked resource development. Some leaders, including Grand Chief Gerald Antoine, argued passionately to resist pressure from Canada to begin a land selection process and build on the existing treaties. Some argued that the DFN should take its case to the United Nations or even to the British Queen Elizabeth II to honor the oral version of the treaties.

Chief Lloyd Chicot of the host Ka'a'gee Tu (Kakisa Lake) First Nations summed up the debate in a powerful speech:

“Don’t table this motion,” he said, “we have made a lot of progress even though there are many problems to be solved and we have been talking about these things for a long time. We have to be proactive, we have to make things happen, the future is still ahead of us. We’re not extinguishing our Treaties, we’re building on them. It is time to stop exploring and begin negotiating. [chief negotiator] Georges [Erasmus] would not be sitting at the head of this team if we were going to get a bad deal. It is time to put meat on the bones of the Dehcho Process.”

Chicot’s comments about “exploring” referred to previous Assembly resolutions calling on the negotiating team to explore land selection but without a mandate to negotiate land selection.

Richard Lafferty of the Métis local at Fort Providence agreed with Chicot, saying that “negotiations implies compromise but we can still trust our negotiators to get the best deal for us that is possible.”

Erasmus responded to the anxieties expressed about pressure and loss of the traditional Dehcho view of the Treaties that had never ceded, extinguished or surrendered their land.

“This resolution, if you pass it, is not closing any doors. It is a tough resolution. Canada may not accept it. We have to push them all the time. The resolution will open doors and you can always stop the talks. You will have many chances to vote against an AiP, even against a Final Agreement or anything else along the way. You can always turn it down. Putting the LUP in place, the Nahanni Park Expansion Reserve, the Protected Areas Strategy and other things already is a better deal than any other agreement in Canada.”

Acknowledging there was always a risk in making a clear decision, the chief negotiator said, “the bigger risk is defeating this resolution because then we have no tools with which to negotiate. With these wonderful tools -- the Land Use Plan implementation, honoring the IMA, extending the PAS – we can go for an agreement that will look after the things you are worried about. ”

As the Assembly voted in the arbor at Kakisa Lake, it was after 7 p.m. Friday June 27. The delegates had been discussing many issues but the big one, the Dehcho Process Negotiations resolution had been hanging over everyone’s thoughts, around the camp fires at night, during the drum dances, over meals, huddled in groups and tents during rainstorms the issue of land selection was never far from people’s thoughts.

The fire in the centre of the arbour burned day and night. A huge and fearsome decision had to be made. After the clear vote, people headed for home. The process will continue.

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For further information please contact DFN at the above address