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## For immediate release

### MAJOR DECISIONS APPROVED AT ASSEMBLY MOVE DEHCHO FORWARD

KAKISA LAKE – June 30 – It was decision-making time for the Dehcho First Nations.

At the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Assembly, on the shores of beautiful Kakisa Lake deep in the North's Boreal Forest – during rain and sun – chiefs, elders and voting delegates from 10 Dehcho First Nations and three Métis locals rolled up their sleeves and worked through a packed agenda.

Tents were dotted all around the campgrounds in the Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation as some 250 people came to a sometimes rain-soaked meeting in the majestic arbor with a perpetual fire burning in the centre reminding the voting delegates who sat facing it of their culture, tradition and spiritual relationship to the Land and the Creator. Each day began and ended with prayer in the Dene language thanking the Creator for the land and asking for strength, courage, wisdom and unity.

Major decisions had to be made, many had been deferred for too long. The First Nations had suffered through some difficult events recently<sup>86787</sup>, now – especially the young people and leaders – it was time to heal from the devastation of residential schools, government inaction and ineptitude and internal disputes and move forward.

There was new leadership: interim Grand Chief Gerald Antoine's term was extended until the next Assembly in mid-2009 and he was interim no longer; and Ria Letcher, the energetic new executive director and her DFN staff kept the delegates working long hours to meet the expectations of the people.

Chief Lloyd Chicot's small band at Kakisa provided Dene hospitality and fed and cared for the revered elders and Dehcho Dene who had driven into the tiny community.

Drum dances, fireside conversations, a brilliant new DFN film called "Dehcho Ndehe gha Nadaotsethe" ("Fighting for Our Land") and the entertaining Talent Show evening hosted by Bill Erasmus, head of the Dene Nation, provided a welcome respite from the often mind-numbing and bloodless reports that the rules of an Assembly demand for accountability. But the agenda was long, despite the patient and skilled chairing by Margaret Thom and Raymond Sonfrere and several actions had to be deferred to the next Leadership meeting.

But, the key decisions and reports were discussed, sometimes at great length, and key decisions made:

- Interim Grand Chief Gerald Antoine was confirmed as Grand Chief until the normal election time of June 2009. He accepted the extension of his term, but in a passionate and emotional speech urged the Dehcho to be more open, more straightforward, more united and supportive of each other (see related story).
- Rejected after a long and arduous discussion, a detailed and lengthy report on regional elections for Grand Chief, keeping to the current system of election for three-year term by the annual Assembly. While voting down the regional proposal, the delegates accepted a report from the DFN Elections Committee with new and more tightly-drawn criteria for nominations to the position of Grand Chief which will be screened by the committee before going to an Assembly.
- Approved a report from the Nahanni Park Expansion Working Group (NEWG) to protect 95 percent of the South Nahanni Watershed with the Dehcho sharing 50-50 in managing the Reserve with Parks Canada. The DFN has consistently supported protection of the watershed through expansion of the park boundaries. It signed a memorandum of understanding with Parks Canada in 2003 and talks have continued until today. The boundaries of the park will be expanded to protect the Greater Nahanni Ecosystem while leaving a small buffer of non-park land around Nahanni Butte and the existing interests of two mining companies – Canadian Zinc and Northern Tungsten – intact. In passing the resolution the onus is now on the federal government through Parks Canada to sign an agreement. At a meeting in Ottawa in April, Grand Chief Antoine received indications from National Parks Minister John Baird that Ottawa will quickly approve the NEWG recommendations. Twenty-five percent of the highest mineral potential of the Park remains open for development but is restricted to areas where there are existing mineral leases.
- Heard a report from the negotiating teams for Canada (Mike Walsh, senior negotiator) and the GNWT (Steve Iveson, chief negotiator) outlining government positions. Walsh, standing in for Chief Negotiator Tim Christian, argued that Canada had moved “a long way” from its old policies of “cede, surrender and extinguish” Dehcho rights to the land and wished to negotiate a “modern treaty” based on self-government, land quantum and certainty. A number of speakers, including the Grand Chief, responded that Canada’s recent apology to First Nations for its role in the devastation of residential schools should create new policies for land claims negotiations other than the current comprehensive claims policy. Walsh agreed that there had been no change in government policies as a result of the apology on June 11 by Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Other delegates described the report as “hurtful”, “divide and conquer” and “putting us in a corner to force land selection.” The report was lengthy and passionately rejected by most speakers (*see related story on Dehcho Process negotiations.*)
- Received the annual report for 2007 from the trustees of the Dehcho First Nations Master Trust in which \$15 million from the 20005 Settlement Agreement is invested. The Assembly approved a motion to appoint Darlene Sibbeston to the Investment Management Board for a three-year term.
- Received reports from Edehzhie Working Group, the Access and Benefits team, and updates from the Protected Areas Strategy (PAS) in the Dehcho region. The PAS includes Edehzhie, Sambaak K'e, Pehdzeh Ki Ndeh whose interim protection expires in October pending renewal by the Federal Cabinet.

- Received a detailed progress report from Michael Nadli, chair and chief executive officer, of the Dehcho Land Use Planning Committee (DLUPC). Nadli explained that the work of DLUPC was nearly complete and that a completed document was expected to be completed by the fall and presented to the main negotiating table. The document is significantly different, it was pointed out, than the initial plan approved at the DFN Assembly in 2006 and then rejected by Canada and the GNWT. Parts of the new draft plan have been significantly changed, especially around special management zones and conformity requirements. Approval and implementation plans by the members of the main negotiating table are still to be hammered out. Nonetheless the Assembly agreed that the DLUP was a “unique achievement”.
- Approved, after lengthy debate, a resolution mandating the Dehcho Process negotiating team to continue talks with Canada and the GNWT within a “strict hierarchy” of work (*see related story*): the highest priority for negotiations is completion, approval and timely implementation of the Land use Plan; secondly, after the LUP is approved and agreed upon and Canada has agreed to honor the Interim Measures Agreement, negotiations can begin on self-government arrangements relating to lands and resources; thirdly, DFN can begin negotiations on other AiP matters, including surface and sub-surface land selection, primarily outside conservation areas; and, fourthly, negotiators will develop strategies for the implementation of the jurisdiction of the Dehcho Dene in our territory based on our understanding of the Treaties.
- Approved the report of the Scholarships Committee for 2008 scholarships: 15 of 26 applicants for the \$2,000 scholarships were approved; four applicants were received and approved for the \$1,000 scholarships; and Riel Antoine of Fort Simpson was awarded the Phoebe Nahanni Memorial Scholarship of \$12,000 from among four applicants (*See list of winners*).

The fire that had burned day and night for five days of the Assembly was allowed to burn down. Drummers prayed a closing song and delegates shook hands and returned to their homes, leaving several small items to be handled by the Leadership at its next meeting.

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