

Grassy Narrows Declares Moratorium and Challenges MNR Tender Process Currently Underway

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Grassy Narrows –Today, Grassy Narrows First Nation’s Chief and community leaders declared a moratorium on all industrial activity within their traditional territory without community consent. The moratorium rebukes a Provincial plan to increase clear-cut logging and asserts that any development proposals must gain community consent and participation. The moratorium was issued to government and industry leaders responsible for the ongoing destruction of Grassy Narrows traditional territory, including Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, Ontario Minister of Natural Resources and Aboriginal Affairs David Ramsay, Prime Minister Steven Harper, Abitibi Consolidated, Weyerhaeuser Corporation, and companies sourcing from the Grassy Narrows Traditional Territory.

Citing continued land management crises, environmental destruction and human rights violations, Grassy Narrows is the tenth Northwestern Ontario First Nation to call for a moratorium on its traditional lands, and the first such community located within existing logging tenures.

“We have been seeking for many years a constructive solution to this untenable situation, but the response has always been to talk and log. We cannot sit back and watch the demise of our way of life which disappears every time more cutting areas are extended to Abitibi and Weyerhaeuser,” said Grassy Narrows Council Chief Simon Fobister.

The letter criticizes industry and government officials for a pattern of broken promises. On July 13, prompted by a one-day blockade of log trucks on the TransCanada Highway, Ontario Aboriginal Affairs Minister David Ramsay told the CBC that he was “certainly committed to deal with the issues that Grassy Narrows is bringing up.” Five days later, Chief Fobister asserted that “the opportunity is there now for the governments to respect [our] knowledge and work with First Nations.” Market conditions recently forced the closure of the Abitibi Consolidated Kenora paper mill, creating an opportunity for the province to address Grassy Narrows’ longstanding grievances while industrial demand for wood is low. Instead, on Sep. 25, 2006 the Ministry of Natural Resources unilaterally invited proposals for the construction or expansion of mills that would result in increased logging within Grassy Narrows’ Ancestral Traditional Territory.

“For decades the Ontario government has assisted the corporations in annihilating the land-base which we depend on as Aboriginal people,” explained Steve Fobister, Grassy Narrows Band Councilor with Forests Portfolio.

“The government and industry have conspired to destroy much of what we hold sacred,” said Joseph B. Fobister, a Grassy Narrows business owner, trapper and land rights advocate. “Our traditional values and culture are suffering and are headed towards extinction. A way of life disappears with these forests. This has to stop so that we can reconcile, re-build our nation, and provide for our children and future generations.”

The community promises to “take more action with our supporters in the forest, in the markets, in the legislature, and in the courts to assert our rights as the Indigenous people of this land.” The moratorium call comes as the Grassy Narrows logging blockade enters its fifth year of denying logging trucks access to the community’s traditional territory via highway 671.

“Clear-cuts are an ecological crime and a cultural nightmare for communities who depend on the Boreal Forest,” commented David Sone of Rainforest Action Network’s Old Growth campaign. “People don’t want to build their homes with Weyerhaeuser wood products that are stolen from Grassy Narrows.”

Background

For decades the community has sought redress through environmental assessment requests, official appeals, petitions, legal action, and unanswered public protest which gave rise to a community logging blockade, now the longest running in Canada. The action intensified this summer as 100 supporters joined community activists in shutting down the TransCanada highway for a full day. Twenty-one people, including 3 young Grassy Narrows mothers, were charged with mischief as a result of the action.

A lawsuit filed in 2000 by community trappers challenges the authority of the province to issue logging licenses on Grassy Narrows’ traditional territory north of the English River and asserts that clear-cut logging violates the community’s rights under Treaty 3. A full trial was ordered for this case, and in May 2006 the Ontario Superior Court of Justice ordered Ontario to pay the legal costs of the trappers to bring the case forward. The litigation is underway, but the trial likely will not take place until 2008. Meanwhile, clear-cut logging continues unabated.

In a recent submission to the United Nations, Amnesty International argued that current logging on Grassy Narrows’ traditional land violates the community’s Indigenous rights to self-determination and culture, and fails to meet international standards of “free, prior, and informed consent” for development on traditional Indigenous lands.