

Three First Nations treaties nearly finalized

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The head of the B.C. Treaty Commission says he's optimistic that as many as three First Nations treaties with the provincial and federal governments will be finalized this year.

At the release of the commission's annual report in Victoria Wednesday, Steve Point said the negotiating climate in B.C. had improved in recent years.

"It's with great expectations that we say now that treaties are on the radar, we expect that they will be finalized this year," Point said.

The commission is an independent group that facilitates treaty negotiations between the provincial and federal governments and First Nations in B.C.

The commission's report also calls for speedy ratification of the treaties.

Commissioner and former B.C. premier Mike Harcourt said it shouldn't take any longer than six months for governments to ratify the treaties once they're approved by the bands.

Seven First Nations in B.C. are in the final stage of the treaty process.

Two of the nations, the Tsawwassen band in the Lower Mainland and the Lheidli T'enneh from the Prince George area have completed negotiations and are ready to begin the approval process.

A third group, the Maa-nulth from the Port Alberni area, is close to an agreement.

Negotiator doesn't share optimism

However, a First Nations negotiator on Vancouver Island doesn't share the B.C. Treaty Commission's optimism.

Robert Morales of the Hul'qumi'num treaty group says he's not seeing the "give and take" needed to reach an agreement in his talks.

The Hul'qumi'num treaty group covers 6,200 in six bands around Ladysmith and Duncan. The group has been in the treaty process for 16 years and has finally reached the "agreement in principle" stage.

But Morales said government negotiators came to the table with their vision of a final treaty, and aren't prepared to make changes.

"The picture is drawn and the colours are there, and you can tinker around the edges, but you really can't change any of the very substantive differences of opinion because those mandates that government brings to the table have already been predetermined," Morales told CBC News.

He said under the government's terms the treaty group would lose control over their land and would be unable to lift themselves out poverty.

Morales said he is happy for the other First Nations who are working out their own treaties, but adds that the Hul'qumi'num group feels that they are looking at an agreement that was shaped long before they sat down at the table.