

Commissioners Expect Three Treaties this Year

By Tom Fletcher
Black Press (Nanaimo Bulletin)
30 September 2006

After 13 years of negotiations around the province, members of the B.C. Treaty Commission are confident they will see their first treaties ratified in the next year.

At a news conference to release the commission's annual report Wednesday, chief commissioner Steven Point said he expects three treaties to be completed soon, likely starting with the Lheidli T'enneh in the Prince George area.

The first community to enter the B.C. treaty process in 1993, the Lheidli T'enneh were also first to sign a final agreement that is now being considered for ratification by band members.

The Tsawwassen First Nation in the Lower Mainland was the second to finalize an agreement in August. Others at the final stage of negotiations are the Maa-nulth First Nations group on Vancouver Island, the Sechelt and Sliammon on the Sunshine Coast, Yale First Nation in the Fraser Canyon and Yekooche First Nation near Fort St. James in northern B.C.

Former B.C. premier Mike Harcourt, who is stepping down next spring after four years as a treaty commissioner, said he is pleased to see both the federal and provincial governments have changed from the "fierce opposition" that greeted the Nisga'a treaty in 2000.

He praised Premier Gordon Campbell for taking a leadership role nationally and setting aside \$100 million in B.C. to build independence in aboriginal communities, after starting out as a treaty critic.

"I think the premier to his credit has had a conversion on the road to Damascus," Harcourt said.

Point, a provincial court judge and former tribal chair of the Sto:lo Nation, said it is up to aboriginal groups to settle their numerous overlapping territorial claims, just as provincial and federal governments have a duty to ratify treaties quickly.

Point said the Sliammon First Nation has provided a model for this, settling shared territory agreements with seven neighbouring bands as well as a community plan that works with the city and regional district of Powell River.

Commissioner Jack Weisgerber, a former B.C. aboriginal relations minister, acknowledged that members of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs still haven't expressed an interest in joining treaty talks, although they are cooperating with the B.C. government's New Relationship initiative.

And not all the participants are optimistic. Robert Morales, chief negotiator for the six-member Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group on Vancouver Island, said his talks have been essentially stuck at stage four for the past 10 years.

Federal and provincial negotiators appear to have strict guidelines, such as granting no more than five per cent of traditional territory in land settlements, and clawing back federal benefits in exchange for resource sharing agreements, he said.

"We have come to the conclusion that we're not really in a negotiation," Morales said. "It's more of a take-it-or-leave-it proposition."

There are 57 aboriginal communities involved in the B.C. treaty process, with 40 of them at the fourth of five stages. Point said once the first few treaties are ratified, others should follow more quickly.
