

First Nations Present Unified Face: Local Bands Join Forces with Several Others in Effort to Kickstart Negotiations

By Aaron Bichard

Duncan News Leader and Pictorial. 5 November 2006, p. 7.

While government officials and the Lheidli T'enneh outside of Prince George prepared to initial a landmark treat, 48 First Nations joined forces in Nanaimo last weekend to sign a landmark unity protocol.

The group, representing more than 20,000 aboriginal people from 14 treaty talks province-wide, wants to open discussions about the reasons behind why some issues at the treaty table are non-negotiable.

"When we try to engage in debate as to why some negotiation stances are the way they are, we are told it is a decision based on a higher level of policy making, and the reasons aren't discussed," said Robert Morales, chair of the First Nations Summit Chief Negotiators. "We can't accept that. We need a forum where we can engage in real negotiations."

In Prince George, a First Nation representing 320 people Sunday initialed the final treaty agreement.

The deal, worth an approximate \$73 million, gives the First Nation more than 4,000 hectares of land, logging and fishing rights, and more than \$25 million in cash during the next 10 years.

The treaty also gives the Lheidli T'enneh an amount of self-governance, giving law-making and taxation powers to the band on its land.

Morales said the framework for this first treaty wouldn't work as a cookie cutter for the rest of the provincial negotiations. "With self-determination there could potentially be three laws -- the First Nation's, the provinces and Canada's -- dealing with the same issue," he said. "We need to have more discussions to know which takes precedence, and who will be responsible for enforcement."

The unity protocol outlined six key areas of concern: certainty; constitutional status of treaty lands; governance; co-management in traditional territories; fiscal relations and taxation; and fisheries.

Morales said the solidarity could lead to one treaty table negotiating on behalf of the 48 First Nations, or options could be taken back to individual tables to be considered.

"We aren't prepared to accept the one size fits all approach, but we want to be unified in our message," he said. "The ball is now in the governments' court as to whether they accept our requests or deny them."

Morales said if the First Nations' requests are denied, Plan B could go as far as taking direct action.

“We definitely need to be more assertive about our land title rights,” Morales said, “We want to put the leverage back on our side of the table.”