



Okanagan Indian Band

12420 Westside Road

Vernon, BC V1T 7Z3

Canada Reneges on Minister's Promise to Negotiate Critical Okanagan Band Claim

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For Immediate Release (Vernon) At a meeting in Vernon yesterday afternoon, negotiators for the government of Canada withdrew from negotiations of the Okanagan Band's Commonage Reserve Claim. This massive claim was submitted under Canada's Specific Claims Process and accepted for negotiation by Canada 5 years ago by then Minister of Indian Affairs, the Honourable Robert Nault.

"Minister Nault met with us 5 years ago to discuss our specific claims", stated Fabian Alexis, Chief of the Okanagan Band. He admitted that the delay in resolving outstanding claims was awful and apologized for taking 11 years to review our Commonage Reserve Claim. He accepted our Claim for negotiation and promised to give proper direction to his negotiators to resolve our Claim".

"Canada's decision to pull out of these landmark negotiations is disturbing and disappointing", continued Chief Alexis. "The decision is all the more disturbing as it was made by Indian Affairs staff and not by Minister Andy Scott himself".

Federal negotiators confirmed that a letter terminating negotiations had been prepared for the Minister's signature, but that the Minister had not yet seen the letter, and was not aware of its contents.

The Okanagan Commonage Reserve was set apart for the Okanagan Band in 1877 by the Joint Reserve Commission. The Commission was composed of a representative of Canada, a representative of British Columbia, and a third Commissioner jointly appointed by both governments. Soon after the Commonage Reserve was created, local non-native settlers urged that this 28,000 acre reserve of prime Okanagan ranchland and lakefront be taken away from the Band. After secret meetings between Premier William Smithe and Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald, Canada purported to "relinquish" the Band's interest in the valuable reserve. Canada and British Columbia deliberately kept the Okanagan Band in the dark. The Okanagan Band was never compensated for its loss.

Okanagan Band Council condemns Canada's unilateral withdrawal from the negotiations and has scheduled an emergency meeting of the Okanagan Band membership for Wednesday evening to discuss this development.

“With the 2010 Winter Olympics on the horizon, the eyes of the world will be on British Columbia”, said Councillor and former Chief Reynolds Bonneau. “We will be speaking with our members about the message that we should be sending to this global audience. Right now my thought is that the world should hear that Canada still refuses to deal honourably with the Aboriginal peoples of this province”.

“Canada plays with a stacked deck”, added Chief Fabian Alexis. “They set up this claims resolution process but have the final say about whether to negotiate. They are judge, jury and executioner. It adds insult to injury that they can accept our claim only to change their minds 5 years later”.

The government of British Columbia, the third party to these negotiations, remains at the negotiation table. “We commend British Columbia for its courage in standing up to Canada”, Chief Alexis stated. “If British Columbia and the Okanagan Band can resolve their differences through negotiations, it will be real evidence of the New Relationship announced by Premier Gordon Campbell”.

The Okanagan Band has requested an immediate meeting with Minister of Indian Affairs Andy Scott. “We have confidence that Minister Scott has the integrity to do the right thing and direct his negotiators to resume negotiations”, Chief Alexis concluded. “Canada’s honour is on the line”.

For more information, please contact:

Chief Fabian Alexis
Okanagan Indian Band
Telephone: (250) 542-4328
Email: info@okib.ca