



BRITISH COLUMBIA
ASSEMBLY OF
FIRST NATIONS

507-100 Park Royal South
West Vancouver, BC
V7T 1A2

Ph: 604-922-7733
Fx: 604-922-7433



FIRST
NATIONS
SUMMIT

1200-100 Park Royal South
West Vancouver, BC
V7T 1A2

Ph: 604-926-9903
Fx: 604-926-9923
Toll Free: 866-990-9939



UNION OF
BRITISH COLUMBIA
INDIAN CHIEFS

500-342 Water Street
Vancouver, BC
V6B 1B6

Ph: 604-684-0231
Fx: 604-684-5726

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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It's Time for Ottawa to Take Mountain Pine Beetle Crisis Seriously

Coast Salish Territory/Vancouver – The First Nations Leadership Council applauds Premier Gordon Campbell's commitment to making the mountain pine beetle emergency a top priority and supports a coordinated effort to ensure the federal government's participation in addressing this crisis.

As Premier Campbell hosts a Council of the Federation meeting this week as part of ongoing efforts to create a provincial-territorial position on adapting to existing and developing effects of climate change, BC First Nations are working on their own campaign to convince the federal government to deliver on overdue promised federal funding assistance.

"The devastating effects of the mountain pine beetle on BC's Interior is the biggest natural disaster in the province's history and we welcome Premier Campbell's commitment to making this the focus of BC's contribution to CoF meeting with other premiers," said Shawn Atleo, Regional Chief for the BC Assembly of First Nations.

"But we cannot afford to wait forever for the provinces and territories to come up with a unified position to take to Ottawa on the entire issue of adapting to the many aspects of climate change. In terms of responding to the BC mountain pine beetle crisis we need to take action", added Regional Chief Atleo.

The Conservatives promised during the last election campaign to provide \$1 billion to help BC address this crisis, and Premier Campbell's government has an understanding with First Nations, known as the Commitments Document, that 20% should be directed to helping our communities that are on the front lines of this disaster.

This Commitments Document was drafted in April 2006 and the federal government has not honoured this important understanding. Instead, they manage the funds from federal agencies, and resources are not getting to the First Nations communities.

The situation has become far more urgent in the past two years, with 103 First Nations now situated in beetle ravaged areas that have become a massive tinderbox awaiting fires that could obliterate everything in their paths.

Protecting their communities as the main fire season approaches this year is their overriding immediate priority. Finding ways to adapt and survive – culturally and economically – in the post-infestation forest areas is their next priority.

While the beetle infestation and its compounding effects on the economic crisis created by the U.S. housing-market meltdown and high dollar is a province-wide crisis, it is even more acutely felt in the First Nations communities on the front lines of this epidemic, where unemployment rates can be as high as 80%.

As the federal government prepares to deliver a new budget, we need to deliver the message that it's time for Ottawa to stop handing out funding in a piecemeal fashion based on initiatives that it chooses to support.

Funding must be transferred directly to both the BC government and BC First Nations to be spent on efforts they already know to be priorities after years of studying and living with the consequences of this emergency.

"We welcome a coordinated effort with the BC Government and BC First Nations to obtain this funding, and we hope to have the opportunity to work with Premier Campbell to pursue this goal," said Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, President of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

A key part of the challenge ahead is to raise national awareness of the true extent of the emergency in BC.

Despite the fact that 10 million hectares of forests – a land area greater than that of New Brunswick – is now infested in the BC Interior, there appears to be real little national understanding of what this means for the provincial and national economy, or for the environment.

"This is a clear issue where the BC Government and BC first Nations can see eye to eye and coordinate efforts in a common goal to obtain meaningful direct federal funding that allows them to do what needs to be done," said Grand Chief Edward John of the First Nations Summit political executive.

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The First Nations Leadership Council is comprised of the political executives of the BC Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit, and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

The Council works together to politically represent the interests of First Nations in British Columbia and develop strategies and actions to bring about significant and substantive changes to government policy that will benefit all First Nations in British Columbia.

For more information please contact:

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip
President, UBCIC:

250-490-5314

Ryneld Starr
BC Assembly of First Nations:

604-922-7733

Colin Braker
Communications Director
First Nations Summit:

Office: 604-926-9903
Cell: 604-328-4094