

>Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation<

WUSKWATIM GENERAL BAND MEETING

SPEECH FOR CHIEF JERRY PRIMROSE

JUNE 22, 2004

Tansi, Thank you for being here today to discuss the Wuskwatim Project.

We have called this special community meeting to give you an opportunity to ask questions and talk over issues you may have regarding the project.

As you may know, after four months the Clean Environment Commission Hearing on the Wuskwatim project has concluded and we are now moving into an important stage of the proposed project development, where the people of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation will decide if we proceed.

We know the development process has been complex and difficult to understand. And it has taken up a lot of your Council's time, but we believe it is very important for the future of our community.

Along the way, we've tried to keep you informed through meetings, small workshops, one-on-one conversations and door-to-door visits.

We know many people still feel they haven't received enough information, but we are trying our very best. And we know we can still do more.

I would like to thank the representatives of Manitoba Hydro, our Environmental Management Team, our Future Development Team and our legal advisors for being here today to help us better understand the project.

In reality, this is a pretty straightforward development project. And hopefully by the end of the day, we will all have a clear idea about what is involved.

We may not agree on everything, but it is important to have the facts. The hardest part of working through this process is that there are people in our community that have not come to the meetings or accepted the information at their doors.

By doing so, they haven't heard the facts. They haven't asked questions. And I am worried they have closed their hearts and minds to the process of consultation.

We also know some misinformation has been spread throughout our community.

Some of this is because of anger and mistrust and it is about more than just the CRD and Hydro. Some of it is political, and to be expected that in a democratic community. Our Members have strong opinions and we respect that.

But, today we have choices we didn't have before. We are a community that is changing and change is not easy, especially when change in the past has done us no favours. We need to build a history of success to offset and balance failures of the past, and that is why we are trying so hard to ensure this project is done in the right way for the right reasons.

Our focus as we move forward has been to protect our lands and waters, to protect our Aboriginal rights and be sensitive to the rights of other First Nations. And, we are trying to negotiate a partnership that will give our people the best opportunity for a strong future.

We have also tried to keep in mind the interests of the people of South Indian Lake, even though they are on a separate track in seeking their own reserve.

Under law we are obligated to them and we support them and respect their goal, even though the process of separation has not been easy and is still ongoing.

South Indian Lake negotiated its own agreement with Hydro in 1992. Our own comprehensive negotiation with Manitoba Hydro was settled in 1996. It included a compensation package that provided both economic support and control over the development of resources in our traditional lands.

It was this 1996 agreement that led us into these negotiations with Manitoba Hydro for Wuskwatim.

And these negotiations are ongoing. They are open, and as transparent as we can make them.

It is important you understand what we are negotiating, so we can make an informed decision about Wuskwatim when we cast our vote in the referendum later this year.

And whether or not you support Wuskwatim, I want to assure you that we are trying to ensure this development benefits our children and their children.

We need new homes, education for our kids and employment. If we don't act, our problems will grow, just as fast as our population is growing.

These challenges will not go away.

It is clear that living off the land is no longer an option for the majority of our People. Our young people have their own ideas about what they want to do.

Our young People want to maintain our Cree culture, but they also want to be all they can be. Some may choose to be in the professions and trades and to be part of Canada's business, political, cultural, health, social and arts worlds.

They have the right to live as well as anyone else, with the same opportunities. No one can deny them this.

Other First Nations share the same challenges. Most of their leaders are supportive of our proposed Wuskwatim project and publicly supported us at the CEC. They include the:

- Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, AMC,
- Manitoba Keewatinook Ininew Okimowin, or MKO,
- the Southern Chiefs Organization, commonly known as SCO,
- the Chemawawin Cree Nation,
- Mosakahiken Cree Nation,
- Tataskweyak Cree Nation,
- Fox Lake First Nation,
- and also the Swampy Cree Tribal Council.

They recognize the benefits of Wuskwatim, not only for NCN, Manitoba Hydro, and other Manitobans, but also for Aboriginal residents and communities in the north. They come from a place of knowledge and experience rooted in the Aboriginal Cree culture.

We have also received support from business leaders, local government, unions, and others at the CEC. They include the:

- Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the Thompson Chamber of Commerce,
- The mayors of Thompson and The Pas,
- The Manitoba Federation of Labour,
- The Allied Hydro Council of Manitoba,
- The Operating Engineers of Manitoba,
- The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers,
- The Manitoba Industrial Power Users Group,
- Inco Limited,
- The Norman Regional Development Corporation,
- North Central Community Futures,

- Northern Association of Community Councils,
- And also the Keewatin Community College.

This broad support from businesses, municipal governments, education and labour has been very important to us and has helped confirm our efforts to bring this project forward.

Yes, there have also been a lot of critics of Wuskwatim. But none of them have offered an alternative to the project that would create the economic growth we need to fund our basic needs.

Yes, there are risks. But these are well-defined and far outweighed by the potential benefits in the short-term and also in the long-term.

We remain confident Wuskwatim is currently the best way to address our challenges, and we are continuing to work to achieve the best possible deal for our people.

You may have heard that our proposed agreement with Manitoba Hydro, which is still being negotiated, is inferior to the agreement the Cree Nations of Quebec recently negotiated with the Quebec government.

In fact, our SOU or Summary of Understandings, and the Peace of the Braves Agreement, signed by the Government of Quebec and the nine Cree Nations in 2002 are not comparable.

We met several years ago with Quebec's Grand Chief, Dr. Ted Moses, Grand Council of the Crees, to share our experiences.

Ours is a business partnership between our nation and Manitoba Hydro in regard to a single, small hydro project. The Peace of the Braves is a comprehensive economic, social, and cultural agreement between the Provincial Government and the governing authority for the Crees of Quebec. It deals with all the resources in the area, including forestry, mining, and hydroelectric development.

The proposed development in Quebec involves over 800 square kilometres of flooding over old growth boreal forest

It involves the construction of five dams, about 50 dikes, 12 kilometres of diversion channels and would impact 165 lakes and five rivers. Some 555 kilometres of the Rupert would have to be drained turning some sections of the river into a dry ditch. It would in cause disruption to the sanctuaries of many bird species and other environmental impacts.

An environmental activist, who wrote about this project for Aboriginal newspapers said, “There is nothing on the scale of the Rupert River diversion which is being proposed in terms of harmful environmental impacts anywhere in the proposed free trade zone of the Americas.”

Comparing this agreement to our SOU is like comparing a muskrat to a caribou herd. There is no comparison - no valid thoughtful comparison can be made.

Today you have an opportunity to consider all the facts, against some of things you have heard. I thank you for your patience throughout this long process.

Let’s open our hearts and our minds today, so we can plan for our future, with confidence that we have the facts, and we are free from outside interference in our decisions.

Ekosani