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## **ABORIGINAL RECOGNITION AND RECONCILIATION ACT Native leaders unhappy about bill delay**

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GREG JOYCE The Canadian Press VANCOUVER First Nations leaders are disappointed with a provincial government decision to delay groundbreaking legislation affecting aboriginals until after the May 12 election, a member of the First Nations Summit executive said yesterday.

"We weren't happy with the postponing of it but we don't have control of the legislative agenda or the legislature," said Doug Kelly.

The B.C. government and leaders of several First Nations organizations issued a joint statement Saturday saying many concerns had been raised over the proposed Recognition and Reconciliation Act.

The proposed legislation would redraw the aboriginal map of British Columbia, amalgamating First Nations and reducing their official number from more than 200 to less than 25.

The legislation would also recognize the title and rights to land and resources that aboriginals claim as the historic first inhabitants of the province. Until now, bands have had to go to court to have those rights and titles recognized.

Members of the First Nations Summit had already voted in support of the legislation but some First Nations -as well as business, industry and some municipal leaders - had expressed concerns.

Mr. Kelly emphasized the legislation is not dead, only postponed, and in the meantime all parties will continue talks to allay those concerns.

"The decision taken is that the work will continue, the consultation with the province, with business and with other aboriginals," he said.

"Is it dead? The answer is no because what's the alternative? The alternative is what we have today, the status quo, which is uncertainty caused by unresolved title and uncertainty around

projects proceeding or not." The statement was signed by Premier Gordon Campbell, Minister of Aboriginal Relations Mike de Jong, Chief Shawn Atleo of the B.C.

Assembly of First Nations, Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, president of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, and Grand Chief Ed John of the First Nations Summit.

Unlike other provinces, the colonial government of the day did not sign treaties with the aboriginals of British Columbia.

There are about 200 First Nations in the province and only about two dozen have treaties despite a process set up in 1993.

The most recent final agreement was signed between the Tsawwassen First Nation of suburban Vancouver and the federal and B.C. governments.

And the Maa-Nulth First Nations of Vancouver Island have had their treaty passed by the B.C. legislature, but still require federal government ratification.

Despite the glacial pace of treaty negotiations under the auspices of the B.C. Treaty Commission, the province made it clear yesterday that talks continue.

The province announced the conclusion of talks with the In-Shuck-ch First Nation in the Fraser Valley, the first group to enter the B.C. Treaty Commission process more than 15 years ago. Both sides must now negotiate treaty terms with the federal government.

Aboriginal Affairs Minister Mike de Jong said the proposed final agreement with the In-Shuck-ch includes almost 15,000 hectares of provincial Crown land, 1,284 hectares of existing reserve lands near Mission in the Fraser Valley and connection to the provincial power grid. The reserve currently relies on diesel power generators.

Mr. Kelly said there was a "heated" meeting last week between B.C. negotiators and First Nations leaders, prior to Campbell delaying the legislation that he had promised to introduce immediately in the legislature.

Mr. Kelly acknowledged deep concerns from the business community.

"There was considerable concern coming from, in particular, the mining industry. But also the Chamber of Commerce and the B.C. Business Council. They had all expressed concern about the pacing of their proposed legislation," he said.

He said First Nations leaders have been meeting with business executives all along and will continue to do so.

He said those discussions will continue through the summer with the aim of introducing the legislation during the legislature's fall session.