

Hope Standard

Yale treaty moves ahead under Stó:lō protest

By Simone Rolph

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Under the watch of the RCMP, the Yale First Nations celebrated the initialing of their treaty this morning, February 5, at a hushed ceremony at the Yale band office. At the same moment 100 Stó:lō First Nation members gathered at Camp Squeah just two miles down the highway in protest – the original site of the signing.

The ceremony where federal and provincial governments officially sent the agreement out for ratification to the Yale band's members, had been hastily moved from Camp Squeah, after the Stó:lō Tribal Council began to organize the protest.

On Wednesday, head of the Stó:lō Tribal Council, Grand Chief Clarence Pennier said in a press release, “the ministers need to understand that Aboriginal title and fishing rights in the Fraser Canyon belong to all 24 Stó:lō First Nations, not just the Yale Indian Band alone. When the ministers arrive at Camp Squeah they will learn in no uncertain terms that they are in the homeland of the Stó:lō. We plan to roll out our own very special version of a welcoming mat.”

The Stó:lō Tribal Council is concerned that wording within the yet-to be ratified agreement will force other downstream First Nations from traditional salmon fishing sites along the banks of the Fraser River in the Fraser Canyon or have Stó:lō members wanting to access those sites have to ask permission of the Yale chief in order to cross Yale Treaty Settlement Lands.

“They don't have the right to give away your right to fish... they want you to ask permission but you have never had to ask permission of anyone before,” said Pennier to the crowd of protestors at Camp Squeah, a conference centre between Hope and Yale.

“They are talking about getting some of that land other than existing reserve land so that they can put up no trespassing signs... trying to keep people off.”

Pennier told protestors they are there to send government the message that it is unacceptable to sign away their rights to one single First Nations band.

“We need to (send that message) on a continual basis until they get the message and although they postponed this one that doesn't mean they won't do it at another time,” added Pennier.

Back at the band office in downtown Yale, the B.C. Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation George Abbott, told Black Press after the ceremony concluded, the original plans for the celebration were changed after “security concerns were raised by the RCMP.”

“If we were to proceed with the celebration that had been organized for Camp Squeah there might have well been some confrontation, which is obviously something (the RCMP) do not want to see and the Yale First Nations doesn’t want to see either.” Notice went out yesterday that the celebration at Camp Squeah had been “postponed or cancelled,” added Abbott.

“We wanted to proceed with this initialing today because it is an important step in terms of the movement of the final treaty to ratification,” added Abbott.

Chuck Strahl, federal Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and Chilliwack-Hope MP did not attend the ceremony as expected.

“Regarding the fishery,” added Chief Hope, “it is not going to be an exclusive fishing agreement for the Yale First Nations.”

“The Stó:lō will still have the opportunity to fish in the Fraser Canyon, many will go into the canyon on the larger aluminum boats, others will cross our treaty settlement lands to get to the river. We will make a protocol with the different communities, make some sort of an arrangement for them to cross our land to get to the water and cure the fish in a traditional manner.”

“We will review every request, from not only the First Nation people, but sports fishers and all people in general, in a reasonable manner, and I expect things will not change much from the way it is now,” added Hope.

“The Stó:lō assert the right to fish” in the canyon, but “they have not been able to prove anything. Times are changing and we have to abide by the general laws set out in this land and trespass is one of them. They have to respect that.”

“If they go up in our land and leave a mess then we will not authorize them to go in next year...”

“If they make a campfire and it gets away from them, there are big problems, and we will be held responsible for the people on our land.”

“I have spoken to many of the Stó:lō First Nations chiefs in the Fraser Valley and Stó:lō Tribal Council is just a society and societies do not have aboriginal rights.... Their comments do not mean a lot coming from a society. The Stó:lō Tribal Council does not represent a lot of people and the way they conduct themselves I can understand why. They are misleading the people,” says Hope.

Although some assert that the Yale First Nation people are actually Stó:lō, the chief is adamant that Yale is a “unique community on our own, a small community at this point, but we are very different from the Stó:lō – maybe a little more like the Spuzzum people,” to the north.

“This treaty we are working on is for our young people. I acknowledged those school children that were here to witness the initialing. By the time it is implemented.. my

generation will be older and the next generation will be here to take on responsibility for our government. We have an opportunity to build a new government, it is an exciting time, and I think our people are up for the challenge,” added Hope.

Under the treaty the 150-member Yale First Nation will receive a capital transfer of \$10.7 million and economic development funding of \$2.2 million. The mineral rights, forestry and domestic fish resources, as well as gathering and harvesting rights are spelled out within the treaty. Any commercial fishing opportunities in the future for the band for Fraser River sockeye and pink salmon fall under a separate Harvest Agreement.

The band will now focus their efforts on developing their own constitution for self government and work on membership ratification, added the chief.