

Chilcotin Residents Concerned by Possible Secret Negotiations During Pandemic

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Chilko Lake, BC - Residents of the Chilko Lake community were surprised last week to learn that Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett appears to have been actively involved in negotiations with First Nations groups in British Columbia, while refusing to acknowledge any correspondence from impacted land owners, after national news broke reporting potential agreement with Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs and the Federal government.

The surprise follows six years of the Minister ignoring hundreds of letters and emails written by Canadians caught in the crossfire of a Title Lands agreement between the Tsilhqot'in First Nation and the Federal and Provincial Governments. The agreement has had the unfortunate consequence of literally land locking hundreds of non-indigenous residents and business owners in the middle of 440,000 hectares of what has become First Nations private property. There has been no direction or correspondence from the Government as to how to proceed or what to expect in terms of their future and their economic survival, as the final details of the Title agreement are negotiated behind closed doors.

Many businesses that have invested millions of dollars in infrastructure and lodging based on jurisdictional and zoning arrangements in the past, have had to put operations on hold while access to their properties is uncertain and their activities are restricted by the new agreement and jurisdictional change.

Local resident and business owner Brian McCutcheon founded Bear Camp in Chilcotin and has been an international tour operator in the area for more than three decades:

“As a long-standing member of the community I am fully in support of reconciliation efforts being made by the government to right historical wrongs suffered by our First Nations neighbours. My business has worked cooperatively and peacefully with First Nations groups for decades, and our argument is not with them. Quite frankly we are hurt and shocked as Canadians that our own government has ignored our pleas for inclusion in discussions that will impact the fate of our homes and our livelihoods that span back generations. We cannot even get an acknowledgment from Minister Bennett, while we watch our businesses flounder and the future we have built for our children and grandchildren hang in the balance without so much as a letter of response.”

Community members like Brian are frustrated with the lack of transparency and clarity on behalf of the Federal government, but had at a minimum trusted that these critical negotiations would be put on hold during the global COVID 19 pandemic so that a fair discussion and access to decision makers would be possible.

“It is devastating and disheartening to read that negotiations are still happening behind closed doors in a time when so many are feeling vulnerable and are potentially dealing with personal tragedy,” says McCutcheon.

“People in our community stand to lose everything and we don’t seem to be able to turn to our own government for inclusion, transparency and reassurance that as Canadians our rights will be protected.”

In recent months and weeks, residents across the entire Chilcotin region have been reaching out to all the provincial and federal governments for clarity on the state of the negotiations and to ask for some representation at the negotiating table, while a number of responses have been received, none has yet come from the Office of Minister Carolyn Bennett.

CONTACT:

Brian McCutcheon

brian@iroamtheworld.com

888 639 1114

Cell 250 551 7600