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Ecosystems at risk in Far North as development rush trumps planning

Groups call on Ontario government to rescue Premier's Far North vision before it's too late

Toronto - On the second anniversary of Premier Dalton McGuinty's historic Far North planning and conservation announcement, intrusive industrial developments are going forward with no plan and no oversight by Ontario's resource management agencies. Five public interest groups are questioning why Ontario government staff are not implementing the Premier's promise to put proper land use planning before development for this vast natural region.

Two years ago today Ontario promised to create a globally significant interconnected network of conservation lands across the Far North. The announcement was greeted with much fanfare in Canada and around the world. The plan promised to enshrine a new respect for and working relationship with First Nations, including new approaches to resource benefit sharing and a greater say in the future of their communities and traditional lands.

Two years later, however, no planning framework is in place, rapid development is proceeding, resource development benefits are not being shared and the government's draft *Far North Act* falls far short of enabling a modern approach to planning that would put First Nations in decision-making roles for community and regional planning.

"Airstrips are being built without authorizations, drilling activities are intrusive, and railways and mines being planned by companies while the draft legislation fails to address conservation issues" says Justin Duncan of Ecojustice.

"This is what the Klondike gold rush looked like", said Dr. Rick Smith of Environmental Defence. Mining claims have more than doubled in the Far North over the last 3 years, the groups note.

"Right now activities are pre-empting planning and pre-determining a path of development without First Nations and without full consideration of ecological values," says Anne Bell of Ontario Nature.

"What started out with a bang in July 2008, has by mid- 2010 been reduced to a whimper," says Janet Sumner of CPAWS-Wildlands League. "We are asking Premier McGuinty to fix the shortcomings of Bill 191 so Ontario's Far North can be a model for the world," Sumner added.

Recent polling shows that northerners want to see a responsible approach to development in the ecologically important Far North landscape and understand that economic growth, cultural and ecological protection can go hand in hand if proper planning occurs. A MacAllister Research poll shows 86% of Northern Ontario residents agree that protection of natural ecosystems such as forests, lakes and rivers should take place first, before governments give large industrial projects approval to proceed.ⁱ

High resolution photos of development proceeding in the north without planning approvals are available by contacting Anna Baggio at (416) 453-3285 or by email: anna@wildlandsleague.org

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For more information please contact:

Janet Sumner, Exec. Director, CPAWS-Wildlands League 416 971 9453 ext. 39

Rick Smith, Exec. Director, Environmental Defence (416) 670 9521

Justin Duncan, Staff Lawyer, Ecojustice (416) 368-7533 ext. 22

Catharine Grant, Boreal Campaigner, Forest Ethics (416) 527-2284

Victoria Foote, Director of Communications, Ontario Nature (416) 444 8419 ext. 238 (647) 290-9384 (cell)

Backgrounder

Quick Facts

- The Northern Boreal region is 43 per cent of Ontario's land mass.
- It lies north of approximately 50 degrees north latitude
- It is home to 24,000 people living in 36 communities.
- The region absorbs approximately 12.5 million tonnes of CO2 from our atmosphere each year.
- It is home to sensitive species such as woodland caribou, wolverine, polar bear, and lake sturgeon.

Far North Initiative Timelines

July 14, 2008: Premier McGuinty announces Far North Initiative

September 2008: Premier McGuinty announces that new legislation will be created to guide the Initiative

March 2009: The Far North Advisory Council, a multi-stakeholder committee of industry and conservation groups, completes their recommendations and supports the establishment of a strong regional planning body with First Nation representation (see: www.mnr.gov.on.ca/en/Business/FarNorth/2ColumnSubPage/266511.html)

June 2009: Bill 191, The *Far North Act* is introduced for first reading in the Ontario legislature

Summer-Fall 2009: Widespread disappointment with failure of draft act to provide meaningful mechanisms to guide regional planning that involve First Nations and address development and conservation in a coordinated manner

May 2010: The Far North Science Advisory Panel report is released that calls for coordinated regional planning (see: www.mnr.gov.on.ca/en/Business/FarNorth/2ColumnSubPage/266512.html)

June 2010: Bill 191 passes second reading without meaningful changes recommended by Advisory Panel, Science Panel, First Nations or ENGOS

September 2010: Planned return of the Far North Act to the Ontario legislature for clause by clause review and final (third) reading and passage.

ⁱ Public Attitudes towards the Economy and Environmental Conservation in Northern Ontario – Spring 2010, MacAllister Public Opinion Research. Full document available at: www.borealopportunity.ca