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Manitoba Disregards Peguis First Nation Again - Peat Mine Road Building Starts

The Manitoba government has decided to disregard the Peguis First Nation assessment of traditional use, impacts on aboriginal rights, and environmental effects from two peat mine proposals. After twenty months of licence appeals, community consultations projects, and extensive technical work by Peguis the peat mine *licence appeals* were refused by Manitoba Conservation. Licences were issued for two new peat mines in Peguis territory and Peguis treaty land entitlement area, February 22, 2013.

The Peguis First Nation main community is located near the top of the interlake region in Manitoba. Peguis territory extends throughout the eastern interlake, and southern Manitoba. The Washow Peninsula into Lake Winnipeg is the location of the two peat mine leases and licences. Cottage communities, and a provincial park are nearby.

Despite 'stringent new standards' for the licences, and new requirements for both SunGro and Berger to set up before operating the new mines, road building by Berger Peat Moss started immediately.

Councillor Mike Sutherland, who participated in all stages of the community consultation project last summer, commented: "We told the government this peninsula is our pharmacy, and a primary source of medicinal plants. We told them drying out this peninsula, which filters wetlands for Lake Winnipeg, is a high risk activity. We told them they did not include our subsistence economy and hunting in their decisions."

Problems started when Manitoba did not notify or consult Peguis First Nation when issuing peat leases in the 1990s. Those leases were renewed without notification or consultation. Then Manitoba issued both peat mines an environment licence right after declaring in June 2011 a two year moratorium on new peat mines. No notification, consultation or accommodation occurred at any point either.

Numerous appeals of the 2011 SunGro and Berger peat mine licences came from First Nations, cottage associations, and environmental organizations.

Based on a work permit dated January 1, 2013, work on an all weather road by Berger Peat Moss began Tuesday, February 25. The new licences require plant studies, transplanting of endangered species, and medicinal plants, new buffers on all riparian zones, plus setting up extensive water testing and monitoring systems.

Mike Sutherland, Councillor for Peguis First Nation voiced his concerns: “We don’t think the cabinet knows what is going on. Even the minister did not expect the road building to start right away. This road is not required now, and the intent of the environment licence is being lost. We are right, draining this peninsula for peat mines is wrong.”

Contact:

Mike Sutherland, Councillor, Peguis First Nation

1-204-330-4371