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Fox Lake Cree Nation**

**Presentation to
Manitoba Clean Environment
Commission**

**Public Hearing on the Manitoba Hydro-
Wuskwatim Generating Station and
Transmission Project**

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I am here today to speak about the Fox Lake people's experiences with hydroelectric development as a contribution to these discussions on the Wuskwatim project.

Fox Lake is arguably the First Nation that has been most affected by Hydro development in northern Manitoba. Manitoba's three largest hydro dams, which provide over 70% of Manitoba's electricity, are all located within the heart of Fox Lake's traditional territory.

Beginning in the early 1960s with the construction of Kettle Rapids, followed by the construction of Long Spruce in the 1970s and the completion of Limestone in 1992, the Fox Lake people have survived three decades of hydro development.

Two more potential sites, Gull Rapids (known as Keeyask in Cree) and Conawapa, will also be located within Fox Lake's traditional territory. When these two projects are completed, five dams and potentially 5400 MW of hydroelectric capacity will have been developed in an approximately 100 km stretch within Fox Lake's traditional territory.

Despite the fact that the dams were built at the heart of our traditional territory, our Cree Nation community, and the damages we suffered as a consequence, remained overlooked for decades.

Prior to the development of the Kettle Rapids hydro project, the Fox Lake community at Gillam was healthy and self-reliant. In the 1940s and '50s there were efforts to establish a Reserve at Gillam. These efforts were abandoned when our area was targeted for Hydro development.

It is difficult to talk about the atrocities and degradation thrust upon the Fox Lake people. It brings back memories of the losses and damages, the pain and the grief, that the Fox Lake people endured. Our community was taken away from us and re-developed to meet the needs of the hydro workforce.

In Gillam we were classified as squatters; our homes were destroyed, and we were relocated into a "slum" to live in houses sub-standard to those built for the construction workforce.

Our new homes, in the middle of this modern hydro community, had no indoor plumbing; instead we drew water from a well and used outhouses. Most ironic of all, we had no electrical service even though we lived at the site of the then largest hydroelectric generating station in Manitoba.

I will not go into the details of the atrocities I spoke of earlier out of respect for the living and dead. It is only important that you understand that we suffered horribly and were basically abandoned by governments to fend for ourselves the best way we knew how.

Profound culture shock is the only way I can think of to express the effect 6,000 construction workers had, descending upon and taking over, our community of 300.

Most of the First Nations affected by Hydro development were impacted by changing water levels. We weren't just flooded out. We were crowded out of our own community to make way for Hydro's new northern base of operations and swamped by the influx of workers.

The impact was made worse because of the lack of a Reserve at Gillam. Other affected First Nations had Reserve lands that gave them some protection from the influx of newcomers. The Fox Lake people didn't even have that small level of protection or control over their own community.

In addition to the profound social and cultural impacts hydro development had upon the Fox Lake community, there were the damages done to the environment as a result of the flooding.

Almost overnight, after the closing of the gates of the completed Kettle Rapids dam, the waters rose 100 feet flooding forever 54,000 acres of Fox Lake's prime traditional resource harvesting area. Most of Fox Lake's prime resource harvesting area lies under what is now called Stephens Lake, the Kettle Generating Station forebay.

For these reasons, we make the claim that the Fox Lake people have been more profoundly impacted by Hydro than any other community in northern Manitoba.

Though we were initially a member of the Northern Flood Committee, Fox Lake is not a signatory to the Northern Flood Agreement. Consequently, we have fought for years to secure recognition of the damages done to our land and community. Our struggles eventually resulted in the creation of a dialogue with both Manitoba Hydro and the Province of Manitoba to address our grievances.

Now, after years of negotiation, Fox Lake Cree Nation is nearing conclusion of an Impact Settlement Agreement (ISA) with Manitoba Hydro and the Province of Manitoba.

At the same time that we are trying to bring closure to Hydro issues of the past, we have begun, through the Split Lake-Manitoba Hydro Agreement in Principle, exploring a potential partnership agreement on the proposed Gull Rapids Project, similar to the NCN agreement on Wuskwatim.

Fox Lake's goal in the negotiations is to ensure that the current and future membership of Fox Lake Cree Nation receive the maximum possible benefit with the minimum possible impact from the project. At present, we do not see our role as advocating for the Gull Rapids project or any other hydro project. Our role is to explore this opportunity and to provide our membership with the information they need to make a decision.

We wanted to make a submission to these hearings because our history with Hydro gives Fox Lake a unique perspective on the subject. Fox Lake supports the right of any First Nation to seek justice for past grievances. We are committed to seeing that Hydro, Manitoba and Canada are held accountable for the environmental and social impacts that

were inflicted on all of us by past development. However, we cannot support opposition of future development as leverage to re-visit the settlement of impacts from past projects.

Fox Lake supports the Nisichawayasihk people's right to determine for themselves whether this project is beneficial to their community. To not consider the potential opportunities involved in hydro development would be doing a disservice to their present and future generations.

And it is their decision. The membership of NCN will consider this matter and vote in a referendum later this year. And that is where their decision must be made. We recognize the right of people to raise issues before this body, but we urge this Commission to respect the autonomy and sovereignty of NCN.

It is important to remember the lessons that have been learned from previous hydro projects. As a society we know much more now about their short-term and long-term impacts. And because of the lessons learned, environmental impacts are now under much greater scrutiny. The mistakes of the past must never be repeated. And for that, we do rely on the wisdom and discretion of this body, and we urge you to take into account all relevant factors about the impacts of this proposal and measures proposed to address those impacts.

As is evident all over the north, hydro development can be very destructive. In effect, the flooding associated with a hydro dam turns a naturally flowing river or lake into a man-made reservoir. Forests are fragmented by transmission lines, exploration camps, cut lines, borrow pits and roads. Traditional travel routes are blocked or made unsafe. Fish and animal movements are disrupted and changed significantly. Productive hunting and fishing areas are lost to the hunter or fisher.

The significance of all these changes shows the need to focus on the nature of the ecosystem that emerges from hydro development. Any alteration to the ecosystem is an alteration to the "blueprint" of traditional knowledge and pursuits, no matter how minor or irrelevant the alteration may seem to be. When the environment is altered in any way, there is a "natural response" by the landscape and the wildlife. This natural response then has to be "re-learned", if possible, by the hunters, fishers and trappers of the area. Fox Lake members continue to experience the consequences of development that paid no attention to the environment.

The Fox Lake people are just now learning how to exist in the environment left behind by Kettle, Long Spruce and Limestone. That must never happen again. It is time for a new approach to any future projects.

Future development must be accompanied by investment into the north's environment. Such investment could serve to offset the environmental damage from future hydro projects, rehabilitate areas previously affected by development and preserve other lands.

Aboriginal traditional knowledge and approaches to environmental protection must be

applied to ensure that future development does not destroy the land and waters that have sustained us for thousands of years. Manitoba Hydro, the Province of Manitoba and Canada need to partner with First Nation communities in implementing a policy of investment into the northern environment. The affected lands and waters that remain after hydro construction must no longer be seen as merely an inevitable byproduct of development. These lands and waters are our traditional territories and must return to being a productive part of the land base of our economies.

For this to happen there must be a serious effort to invest in the restoration and rehabilitation of the physical environment that is left in the wake of hydro development. For too long now, the north's resources have been taken away by others, gradually eroding the ability of the land to sustain the people who have lived in the area for thousands of years. A policy of reinvestment in the environment would not only begin to reverse this trend but it has the potential to provide economic benefits for the communities of the north.

Investment into the post-hydro project environment could result in sustaining the local traditional economies and establishing new conventional outdoor recreation, adventure and tourism based business operations. Ultimately, for any resource development to be successful for our communities, it must not undermine our traditional economy nor the environment upon which it is based. Our rights to hunt, fish and trap are protected under our Treaty and Aboriginal rights and the Constitution of Canada. However, what good are those rights if the land is destroyed, and the rivers are dead?

Historically, our traditional economy and the environment have been disregarded in the name of progress. But this cannot be allowed to happen again. There have to be mitigation and compensation measures put in place, both for the individual and the community. However, this is much more than simply writing somebody a cheque for the damages. This is about real investment both in the new environment that will emerge after hydro construction, and in the people who will have to learn to live there.

To conclude my presentation, the Fox Lake people have a tremendous amount of experience with the impacts of Hydro development. Our experiences can serve to inform any future development that takes place in this province.

With any potential future hydro project, it is of the utmost importance that we learn from the past.

We know the impacts construction can have upon people when an area is developed for hydroelectricity. Social impacts must be anticipated and countered with effective mitigation measures and social supports.

With regard to environmental impacts, it is no longer acceptable to just write a cheque to compensate the people for the damages done to their lands and waters. There must be significant and long-term investment toward the planning and management of the new environment that will be created by any hydro project. Such an approach has the potential

to serve both environmental protection and community development.

And finally, we once more urge the Commission to respect the autonomy and sovereignty of NCN.

The people of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation have the opportunity to assess the merits of the agreement proposed with Manitoba Hydro. NCN will decide for itself, through referendum, if the Wuskwatim proposal adequately addresses the social, economic and environmental effects the project will have on their community and the environment.

The Nisichawayasihk People will live with both the rewards, and the consequences of Wuskwatim,. It must be their decision.

Thank you, ekosi.