

Public Statement

5 June 2012

It's time for justice:

Civil society groups urge Ontario to respect and uphold the rights of Asubpeeschoseewagong Anishnabek Grassy Narrows

The people of Asubpeeschoseewagong Anishnabek (Grassy Narrows First Nation) know first-hand the terrible consequences of having control over their traditional lands and territories taken from them.

In the 1950s, provincial hydroelectric dams flooded large areas of land, wiping out wild rice beds central to their culture and way of life.

In the 1960s, a pulp and paper mill in Dryden, Ontario contaminated the rivers with mercury, resulting in the devastating closure of the fishery and debilitating health problems that are still being felt today.

Then, beginning in the 1980s, large-scale, industrial logging cleared over half the forest in the traditional territory of Grassy Narrows, destroying trap lines and other areas vital for sustenance, medicine and ceremony.

Today, the people of Grassy Narrows – and the province of Ontario - face a crucial turning point.

- Clear evidence has been presented that the mercury dumped into the English River system has not gone away, as was once predicted. Instead, chronic exposure to mercury is jeopardizing the health of generations of youth born since the problem was supposedly dealt with in the 1970s.
- An Ontario court has found that the province did not have legal jurisdiction to license resource development over much of the Grassy Narrows traditional territory. The province has agreed that while this case is under appeal, it will not license any new logging in the lands covered by the court decision, unless the people of Grassy Narrows give their consent.
- In the face of united community opposition to clear cut logging on their territory, four major logging companies have decided not to log in Grassy Narrows or handle wood from this territory. A moratorium called by the community has effectively been in force for nearly four years.

However, despite all this, the provincial government has yet to acknowledge that the people of Grassy Narrows have the right to manage their own lands and resources.

Since 2008, the province has engaged in high level forest management negotiations with the Grassy Narrows Chief and Council. Yet, at the same time, the province has continued to work with logging companies to draw up clear cut logging plans for the forest for the next decade. Although as yet they have not been implemented, the plans seek to determine the fate of the forest in the face of Grassy Narrows' explicit opposition.

Furthermore, despite Premier Dalton McGuinty's 2010 commitment to look into the issue of mercury contamination and community health, the province has taken no action to ensure the community's health and safety.

This can't continue. Our organizations stand behind the people of Asubpeeschoseewagong Anishnabek in calling on the province to:

- Commit to fully upholding their rights under Treaty 3 and under international human rights standards such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;
- Support the community in carrying out ongoing, independent monitoring of mercury contamination and other environmental health issues;
- Respect the moratorium called by the people of Grassy Narrows and not license any further industrial development in any part of their territory.

The province must act now to undo the harm that it has caused through decades of violation of the rights of the people of Grassy Narrows. It's a matter of justice, decency and respect for human rights. There must be no more delays and no more excuses. It would be inexcusable for another generation of Grassy Narrows children to grow up in the shadow of environmental destruction and government neglect. A new relationship based on full respect for the rights and the dignity of the people of Grassy Narrows is long overdue.

Signatory organizations:

Amnesty International Canada	KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives
Boreal Action	
Boreal Forest Network	Latin American and Caribbean Solidarity Network
Canadian Friends Service Committee	No One is Illegal - Toronto
Christian Peacemaker Teams	PSAC Ontario
Council of Canadians	Rainforest Action Network
CUPE Ontario	Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario
Earthroots	Science for Peace
Greenpeace Canada	Student Christian Movement of Canada
Health for All	Winnipeg Indigenous Peoples Solidarity Movement
Indigenous Environmental Network	

For more information: freegrassy.org