

OUR LAND IS OUR FUTURE

UNION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA INDIAN CHIEFS

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Dr. Bonnie Henry
Provincial Health Officer
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Via Email: bonnie.henry@gov.bc.ca

Open Letter: Designation of Oil and Gas Work as “Non-Essential” is Critical for Protecting the Lives and Rights of Vulnerable First Nations Facing COVID-19

Dear Dr. Henry,

The Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) is writing in support of the Wet’suwet’en Ts’ako ze’ (female chiefs) who penned an open letter on November 30, 2020 urging you to shut down industrial camps amid COVID-19 outbreaks at LNG Canada and Coastal Gaslink (CGL) facilities. UBCIC joins the Wet’suwet’en Ts’ako ze’ in their call for the province to declare oil and gas work a non-essential service, and to ensure that First Nations lives, cultures, and Title and Rights are not jeopardized by half measures that disregard the vulnerability of First Nations living in northern rural communities.

As the province continues to consider and deploy stricter measures to contain the rapidly burgeoning second wave of COVID-19, it is absolutely paramount that these restrictions protect the most vulnerable communities, and that no industry is left exempt through the prioritization of economic security over Indigenous survival. UBCIC previously endorsed Resolution 2020-17, “Addressing Priority Concerns and Needs of BC First Nations Around COVID-19,” in order to recognize the persistent challenges First Nations communities face as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to call upon the provincial government to provide a more coordinated and effective response to aiding Nations as the pandemic continues.

We highlight the critical concerns expressed by the Wet’suwet’en Ts’ako ze’ over the continuation of three CGL work camps in their territories despite two confirmed cases of COVID-19 at Camp 9A on Unis’ot’en territory. The work camps on Wet’suwet’en territory house over 700 people and stand to

become a hotbed of COVID-19 transmission that will endanger precious lives, including Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Skiy ze' (children and upcoming chiefs), should oil and gas projects be allowed to continue without respecting the welfare and authority of First Nations.

The transmission of COVID-19 amongst workers has been a pressing concern that UBCIC previously raised in an open letter to Premier Horgan and Minister Dix on March 20, 2020, in which we called for a moratorium on Site C Dam construction. Although we understand that the province issued guidelines for industrial camps in March and have allowed them to operate throughout the pandemic, as of December 4th there are now 54 cases of COVID-19 (a number that is likely to rise) tied to an LNG Canada facility in Kitimat. What is alarming is that WorkSafe BC inspection documents revealed that workers at this facility has complained multiple times about unsafe work conditions, months ahead of the current outbreak. As well, a March inspection of the Site C dam found that its sewage facilities had inadequate protections for pathogens, human waste, mold, and COVID-19. Given these findings, and the fact not all work camps have the capability or capacity to track, isolate, and send all COVID-19 positive workers home to self isolate (where many may cohabitate or come into contact with Elders and other community members), it is inconceivable that action wasn't taken earlier to close industrial work camps.

The Wet'suwet'en Ts'asko ze' have also raised grave concerns about the influx of transient workers into their territories and the corresponding rise in foot traffic in their communities that cannot be afforded in a time where social distancing must be upheld. Equally alarming are reports of CGL's private security contractors and the RCMP not respecting mask-wearing and social distancing measures, and continuing to intimidate and surveil Wet'suwet'en Chiefs, Elders, and members. The disregard for the safety and health of First Nations who are defending their rights and the survival of their cultures and sacred traditions, is unacceptable.

Dr. David Bowering, former Chief Medical Health Officer for Northern Health, previously urged you to immediately shut down the industrial work camps early on in the pandemic, calling them "COVID-19 incubators." It is evident that the time is now to respect the rights and wishes of the Wet'suwet'en chiefs and members, to designate oil and gas work as non-essential, and to take strong action to ensure these "COVID-19 incubator" camps will no longer endanger both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. With the ongoing implementation of the provincial Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, the release of Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond's damning review of anti-Indigenous racism in the provincial health care system, as well as the recent introduction of federal UN Declaration legislation, the province has a strong obligation and opportunity in place to ensure that all health protocols and guidelines support the health and self-determination of First Nations.

On behalf of the UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS



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