

MERRITT HERALD

Forest industry survival key to First Nations Reconciliation

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Upper Nicola Band Chief Harvey McLeod

On October 24, the British Columbia government introduced Bill 41: Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act. As a Board member of the B.C. Assembly of First Nations, as elected Chief of the Upper Nicola Band, and as a First Nation community member, I'm excited about this. We were involved in drafting the legislation. I think it shows that the Province, and the people of B.C., are ready to have a real relationship with the 203 First Nations who have lived here since time immemorial. They are ready for reconciliation. My community, and the surrounding communities — both First Nations and non-indigenous — depend on the forest industry. The Upper Nicola Band is a partner in a forestry company. We have relationships with five licensees operating in the region, and with the mill, as well as with the City of Merritt. We are all pushing in the same direction: we all want the forest industry to get back on its feet.

I know that the Province is currently re-drafting the Forest and Range Practices Act. That piece of legislation has probably done more damage to our forests than anything else. But the consultation process that we went through was not enough. We will need to push the Province to make real changes to these laws, ones that recognize indigenous rights, but also recognize that indigenous people are part of this economy.

For our part at the Upper Nicola Band, we are worried that the increase in stumpage, and the decrease in timber supply, will bankrupt our business. Our people will lose their equipment and lose our ability to participate in the economy. I've heard the same fears from other First Nations, and from my colleagues in the industry and at the City of Merritt. But we can't wish trees into existence. We need to come together and decide how to plan for the future.

The survival of the forest industry needs to be central to the project of reconciliation. That doesn't mean continuing on with old ways, until there is no old growth left, and the topsoil washing into streams has choked all of our fish. We need new solutions, both from legislation and from practices on the ground. And we as First Nations must lead these conversations and be ready to adapt to new realities.

We need to acknowledge that the current logging practices are part of what got us here. The planting of lodgepole pine meant we were susceptible to this beetle epidemic. And now that we've cut all those trees, there is nothing left for a sustainable future. There is a lot of desire from the City of Merritt and the five First Nations here to move forward. Right now, we don't have any trees. Our industry is suffering. We're going to hurt, but we'll have to bear that hurt. And that may be what reconciliation looks like. Sharing the pain of this downturn together and collaborating on solutions to this problem. I was visiting a forestry operation recently, and I saw a slash pile full of young healthy trees. I lit some tobacco and said a short prayer. When my colleague from the licensee asked me what I was doing, I told her I was praying. I was praying for these trees because I don't think their purpose, when they grew from a tiny seedling to mature trees, was to be cut down and burned in a slash pile.

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, which many say is a road map for reconciliation, must ensure that we can all meet our purpose. And for those of us who depend on the forest industry to survive, that means the adoption of this new legislation must lead to new ways to keep our industry working.

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