



Premier François Legault
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July 13, 2020

Dear Premier François Legault:

We write to you on this day, July 13th, the 5th anniversary of the 2015 Agreement to Resolve the Baril-Moses Forestry Dispute (“2015 Agreement”). This historic agreement promised continuing dialogue on protecting an area of intact forest in the Broadback River Watershed called the “Mishigamish forest”. Mishigamish essentially means “a large body of water” and is intimately connected to the Cree Way of Life. It is here that Cree families have thrived for many generations living off the land to hunt, fish and trap. For nearly two decades, the Waswanipi Cree and members of other Cree communities have been asking for its protection. In spite of all this, pressure has grown for industrial development the Mishigamish and the broader Broadback River Watershed in the last undeveloped traplines in Waswanipi territory.

This area is a towering old-growth forest, with rivers, lakes and marshes teeming with boreal caribou, moose, eagles, beaver and marten. Its trees and soils are part of the most carbon dense forest on earth, making it a critical hedge against climate change. And it is a place of immeasurable value to the Cree. As Elder Allan Saganash recently said of the Mishigamish, “My way of life, my culture, my language, and my identity as a Cree person are still very connected to the land. That will always be in our hearts.” In September of 2019, the Cree First Nation of Waswanipi and its Chief and Council passed a resolution at the behest of the community to seek “absolute protection” of the Mishigamish and the Broadback River Watershed within Waswanipi territory. This protection is also supported by numerous environmental organizations, scientists, celebrities and other opinion leaders, and major buyers of forest products.

In the 2015 Agreement, the government of Quebec committed to “meaningful discussions...regarding options for protective measures in this area.” Quebec has ultimately failed to follow through on this commitment, holding only one organizing meeting in the fall of 2015, nearly five years ago, and then one meeting last fall. In the meantime, industrial expansion in the form of logging, mining exploration, and road building has continued and is nearing the Mishigamish and broader Broadback River Watershed.

The two roads, H and I, which were included in the agreement, have gone forward without Quebec’s fulfillment of its obligations to the Cree regarding more protection for the Mishigamish and Broadback River Watershed. Now, logging under the five-year plan (2018-2023) threatens to expand into its southern portion this year, with a proposed harvest of six million cubic meters of wood in Waswanipi territory. This imbalanced implementation of the agreement undermines Quebec’s commitment to Indigenous Peoples and its conservation agenda.

The Waswanipi Cree currently have only 8% of their territory protected. Adding the Mishigamish proposal is an essential measure to provide some recompense for the heavy industrial footprint in the southern portion of their territory. According to the Waswanipi Cree, only 10% of their territory remains undeveloped by industry.

It is possible that the Grand Alliance, which focuses on the protection of Eeyou Istchee as one of its three pillars, could be an avenue for conservation of the Mishigamish, the broader Broadback River Watershed, and other culturally and ecologically important areas of Eeyou Istchee. However, there have been no details yet regarding the conservation of this core area of intact forest.

Additionally, this year – 2020 – is critical for implementing broader conservation goals in the province of Quebec. Under the Aichi targets in the Convention on Biological Diversity, Quebec has committed to achieve 17% protection of the province’s overall territory this year. It must also protect 20% of the Province (and 12% under the boreal blanket) covered by the Plan Nord. Conservation of the Mishigamish, the broader Broadback River Watershed, and other lands identified under the Cree Nation Government’s community-driven protected area plan would go a long way towards reaching these goals this year.

These proposals are the best way forward as they respect Indigenous rights and, through Indigenous-led stewardship, are the most effective mechanism for protecting biodiversity, carbon sequestration and water resources. In contrast, the new Bill 46 (Projet de loi no 46 Loi modifiant la Loi sur la conservation du patrimoine naturel et d’autres dispositions) does not recognize this leadership by Indigenous Peoples and represents the perpetuation of the colonialist preference for industrial interests over cultural, social and ecological values.

Protecting the Mishigamish and broader Broadback River Watershed would not only recognize the Waswanipi Cree’s longstanding desire to safeguard this important area, it would be a “win-win” for the Quebec government and industry. It would showcase this new way of creating protection, which is at the heart of Canada’s Target 1 approach. It would also preserve “social license” for industrial activities outside the protected areas. Without protection, roads, logging, mining, and energy projects will continue to create market risk for the extractive industries and for their purchasers and continue to generate uncertainty around their operations.

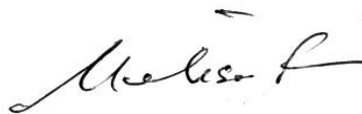
Now is the time for your government to protect this area before it is irreversibly affected by industrial development. Safeguarding the Mishigamish within Waswanipi territory is the final “puzzle piece” that has been missing in the conservation of the Broadback River Watershed. It is a critical measure to advance reconciliation, along with the protection of biodiversity and the climate.

We look forward to working with you to secure this vital protection and to implement the promises of the 2015 Agreement by the end of 2020.

Sincerely,



Anthony Swift
Canada Project Director
Natural Resources Defense Council



Mélissa Fillion
Directrice pour le Québec & Senior Corporate Campaigner
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