



CHIEFS COUNCIL

MEDIA RELEASE

Tuesday, November 3, 2020

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MATAWA FIRST NATIONS STAND IN SUPPORT OF NESKANTAGA FIRST NATION AS THEY EXPERIENCE A LARGE BLOW TO THEIR WATER TREATMENT & DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

THUNDER BAY, ON – The nine (9) First Nations making up the Matawa Chiefs Council today offered their support for Neskantaga First Nation as they experience another large blow to their water treatment and distribution system amid a 26-year lack of clean drinking water crisis and in a global pandemic. They offer their support for the extraordinary measures Neskantaga First Nation have had to take to ensure the safety of their citizens including an evacuation to Thunder Bay for the second time within the span of 12 months (first one in September 2019) due to unsafe drinking water, and this time, a complete water outage, in their community.

A majority of the First Nations of the Matawa Chiefs Council, both road-access and remote, have experienced similar issues with regards to access to clean drinking water. With the exception of two (2) First Nations who have the opportunity to access municipal water treatment systems—all have experienced either ‘boil water’ or ‘do not consume’ advisories, for a lengthy period of time at some point in history.

In addition to Neskantaga First Nation—two (2) First Nations in Matawa are currently waiting for new water treatment systems to be commissioned. Similar to Neskantaga First Nation, and to varying degrees—the process of providing safe drinking water has also been wrought with numerous delays due to the lack of First Nation drinking water standards, cumbersome capital project approval processes including lack of sustained political and financial commitment, inadequate design and construction processes, lack of access to parts for repairs, equipment failures and related infrastructure failures.

Following the questions that have recently been raised in the provincial and federal legislatures with respect to the Neskantaga First Nation water crisis, Matawa Chiefs Council are concerned about the finger-pointing that has been taking place between current and previous governments and the seeming lack of role/responsibility of the Ontario government, now it as it celebrates it’s 5th Annual Ontario Treaties Week, and chronically throughout the years. They say that Ontario must show leadership in the area of actions towards reconciliation by changing its position that Ontario *does not* have a role in the matter of safe drinking water on First Nations. They say that Ontario and Canada should stop wasting time on what they view as ‘jurisdictional ambiguities’ especially if it relates to the health and safety of people and that one government should not be doing more over the other.

A number of actions will be taking place this week in the city of Toronto and Thunder Bay by members of Neskantaga First Nations along with their allies. The Matawa Chiefs Council stand in full support of them and are saddened that they have to risk their health and leave the safe bubbles of their communities in this time of the COVID-19 global pandemic. They plan on meeting as a Council next week.

QUOTES

“I support Neskantaga First Nation on their water crisis. Each of our remote communities experience water system defaults. Whenever that happens, there is outcry from the membership so we react to whatever costs are required which puts us in deep deficit because funding is not available and Indigenous Services Canada tells us to use whatever funding we have but we jeopardize our regular programing. It costs so much to bring in an experienced worker in our community including charters, equipment and labour. Our water and sewer systems are getting to be outdated because when something breaks, they tell us it’s not manufactured anymore so it has to be special ordered which takes time and money. Our facilities need to be upgraded. Our local workers work hard trying to maintain the system and they are underpaid.”

—*Chief Cornelius Wabasse, Webequie First Nation*

“Ginoogaming First Nation hereby holds Ontario Government responsible for the water crisis at Neskantaga First Nation. Ontario is a signatory to Treaty #9; Therefore, has fiduciary obligation and duty, as much as Canada. Failure for Ontario to respond will result in Ginoogaming First Nation to consider legal actions based on Treaty #9.”

—*Ginoogaming First Nation Council*

“Water is a gift from our Creator and a necessity for all human mankind. This original life sustaining liquid was made available through natural sources—rivers and lakes. As our original sources have been contaminated—we have had to capture, control and refine and deliver water through man-made devices and equipment. A majority of mainstream Canadian society are privy to this source of safe water for consumption and use. Our Indigenous communities and Peoples also need this life sustaining liquid. We have not been made any different from any other form of human life. I strongly support the need for this life sustaining substance be made available to Neskantaga and any other community who requires this clean and safe water.”

— *Chief Judy Desmoulin, Long Lake #58 First Nation*

— 30 —

For more information, please contact Carol Audet, Communications Manager – Matawa First Nations Management at: (807) 632-9663 or by email at: caudet@matawa.on.ca

