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Two First Nations working on roads to Ring of Fire do not support new mining law

Liam Casey The Canadian Press
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Protesters and community members chant and wave signs, as they listen to speakers during a demonstration opposing Bill 5, outside the Ontario Legislature at Queen's Park in Toronto, Monday, June 2, 2025. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Cole Burston
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TORONTO - Two First Nations that signed deals with the provincial government to improve access to the Ring of Fire are speaking out against a new Ontario law that seeks to ease mineral extraction in the northern region.

Aroland First Nation Chief Sonny Gagnon said his community objects to the law known as Bill 5, which seeks to speed up development in the face of pressure from the United States.

The legislation passed last week and allows Ontario to suspend provincial and municipal laws by creating so-called special economic zones for certain projects it chooses, such as new mines.

"We do not stand with Ontario in support of Bill 5," Gagnon said in a statement.

"We do stand in support of the other First Nations in Ontario who are opposed to Bill 5 and working to have it thrown out."

Ontario intends to name the mineral-rich Ring of Fire as the first such zone, but the law has created a firestorm of anger among many First Nations. They say they want to be involved in development, but that the new law violates their treaty rights and ignores their concerns.

Aroland signed a shared-prosperity agreement with the province in January for major upgrades to roads that lead to the proposed roads to the Ring of Fire, a 5,000 square kilometre region about 450 kilometres north of Thunder Bay, Ont.

Aroland sits outside the Ring of Fire region with access to the provincial highway system that ends near its territory.

Premier Doug Ford has trotted out Gagnon's name at least five times in recent weeks in defence of Bill 5.

Ford also often points to Marten Falls First Nation and Webequie First Nation, which are the lead proponents for three roads that will connect their remote communities to the provincial highway system.

One of them would connect the Eagle's Nest site in the Ring of Fire, a proposed mine owned by Australian mining giant Wyloo, to the other two roads.

"There's going to be a group that doesn't want anything done," Ford said last week.

"Well, good, don't do it then. There's going to be another group in the middle that says, 'Boy, let's see what happens.' And then there's the progressive group that's saying, 'Let's get it done,' like Chief Sonny from Aroland — and Webequie and Marten Falls."

Gagnon said Aroland has never consented to mining the Ring of Fire. Rather, part of the agreement was designed to give road access to its neighbouring First Nation, Marten Falls.

Marten Falls and Webequie First Nation are fly-in communities that have a month or so of winter road access.

"Aroland has never said Marten Falls cannot build a road so that it is no longer remote; if they want to have road access to the highway system like we do, they should be able to," Gagnon said.

"But that has to be done right — with proper assessment and protection measures and Aroland involvement and consent. The agreement with Ontario is about that, and some necessary electrical power to our community. We were to get funding to support that initiative and so far we have received nothing and instead have spent our own dollars trying to ensure our community has basic services."

Aroland does not consent to that road being used for mining companies, he added.

"We have consistently in writing indicated that no such decision on what happens to the Ring of Fire should be made until the regional assessment being conducted now and being co-led by many First Nations, including Aroland, is complete, and indicates that mining in this sensitive and vulnerable peatlands region is safe for humanity, for us, for wildlife, climate and water," Gagnon said.

"We don't yet know that. More important — Ontario does not yet know that."

Ford took issue with Gagnon's comments.

"Does he want the \$200 million electricity deal that we handed over to him? Does he want to get off diesel because they live on diesel? Does he want a road that they can actually leave their community and drive? Does he want a community centre? Does he want a hockey arena inside that community centre? The answer is 1,000 per cent yes," Ford said Monday at Intersect/25, an event hosted by the Globe and Mail.

Ford said he will be speaking to Gagnon shortly.

"Mark my words in this room, he will be moving forward with us, not because of me, not because of pressuring me, because he's a smart man, and he understands his community needs to prosper," Ford said.

Marten Falls First Nation also has an agreement with the province on roads, and its chief says he cannot support the law as it is written — though he hopes Ontario can correct course with consultation.

Chief Bruce Achneepineskum said he is feeling conflicted.

"I'm not OK with this bill," he told The Canadian Press in an interview.

On the one hand, he and his community want road access built so they do not have to rely on winter roads. Last year, the frozen road only lasted a month as the winter road season keeps shrinking, he said.

Marten Falls also wants to be in the driver's seat for any development in its territory, Achneepineskum said.

"Our intent is to take the lead on development in our area and with that we're still in discussions with government on how to move forward," he said.

"We don't agree with everything that government says and does. So we're taking it on an approach that's based on a negotiation."

Marten Falls First Nation has been working on environmental assessments for the roads.

One of the assessments has been in development for going on six years, though about half that time was lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Achneepineskum said.

"Sometimes, you think to yourself, that is a really long time," he said.

Ford, Indigenous Affairs Minister Greg Rickford and Energy and Mines Minister Stephen Lecce have said the province will consult First Nations on the new law throughout the summer.

Achneepineskum said he is willing to listen to the province and give them time to get Bill 5 right, but, like many other First Nations have said, he wanted the province to consult with them on the language in the legislation rather than starting those conversations after it is already law.

"I have to support Aboriginal and treaty rights that other First Nations are talking about because, in principle, that's what we're fighting for also: to have our rights and interests in our traditional area — and that includes the Ring of Fire — recognized," Achneepineskum said.

Webequie's chief was not available to talk, as he continues to deal with a wildfire that has forced the evacuation of his entire community to southern Ontario.

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