

Quebec Logging faces Aboriginal Protest

Approximately 50 aboriginal people blockaded a Quebec highway to protest the province's forest management practices and the poor condition of aboriginal off-reserve housing across Canada. Chief Guillaume Carle of the Confederation of Aboriginal People of Canada (CAPC) says the province has allowed rampant clear cutting but aboriginal people have not been consulted and have not benefited economically. The protesters want rights to log in the region and to participate in overall forestry planning. They also claim the province breached a verbal agreement which allowed aboriginal people living off-reserve to harvest trees. A previous protest was dismantled due to this verbal agreement. This time, the protesters want to a formal agreement acknowledging this right.

The complete blockage of highway 117, which is the main route between the Laurentians and the Abitibi Temiscamingue region, was set up on March 12. The following day the barrier was dismantled as a sign of good faith in advance of a meeting with Quebec officials.

Not all local aboriginal people are supportive of the protesters. The Barriere Lake Algonquin are also trying to negotiate a forestry agreement with the province and they feel the protestors may undermine their efforts. Some of the protesters are former members of the Barrierer Lake Algonquin. They left the community after a dispute and now live off reserve.

An aboriginal right exists if the activity in question, in this case harvesting trees, is a traditional activity. Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, protects the existing rights of aboriginal peoples in Canada. The government has a duty to protect aboriginal rights and to consult with aboriginal groups when government action will impact these rights. With the logging situation, more than one aboriginal group is claiming an aboriginal right to harvest trees. Because the different stake holders have a shared heritage, their claims may cover the same geographic area. These convergent interests may extend the negotiation of a satisfactory agreement.

Sources:

"Quebec highway blocked by aboriginal group seeking share of forest sector" CBC News (12 March 2007)

"Aboriginal protesters remove Highway 117 barricades: Algonquin leaders denounce protest" CBC News (13 March 2007)

"Armed aboriginal protesters take down barricade blocking Quebec highway" CNews (13 March 2007)

Kazi Stastna, "Highway partly reopened as natives ease blockade" The Gazette (13 March 2007)

Further Reading:

The Confederation of Aboriginal People of Canada

Aboriginal Rights - Background