



Media Release

Cat Lake First Nation was forced by Ontario into the Courts

(Toronto - Ontario Legislature, March 5, 2024) Cat Lake First Nation (CLFN), in a conflict with the Ontario government over Aboriginal Land protection and has secured an injunction against provincially permitted road construction. Despite declaring a mining moratorium (September 2023) and initiating a Anishinaabe Led Impact Assessment (ALIA), Ontario indicated they were seeking to issue permits for road construction favouring First Mining Gold (FMG) days before Christmas and did so on February 9th 2024.

CLFN maintains that it is still considering the development of the Springpole Mine Project in its traditional territory. However, before CLFN consents to any development it has consistently sought to better understand the potential impacts of the project on its Aboriginal rights, including the impact on the ability of members to exercise their rights to hunt, fish, and trap in the area, as well as the impact on possible sacred sites, such as pictographs and burial grounds of CLFN members and their ancestors. The Ontario permit approval significantly destabilized this situation.

CLFN knows the importance of community engagement and understanding of the indigenous peoples' concerns. They choose to follow an ALIA process with a clear timeline for completion (18 months) supported by FMG rather than provincial procedures, This ALIA was to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the potential mine's effects on the land, water, wildlife, and cultural heritage of the Cat Lake community.

“Ontario’s actions here fall far below their constitutional duty to consult and accommodate CLFN’s rights,” stated Chief Russel Wesley. He added, “Ontario’s decision and actions was made in defiance of a well-documented Moratorium on mining in the CLFN Territory. Much earlier, I expressed concern about the dangers of short circuiting the ALIA process and predicted that the Ontario would issue the permits despite CLFN’s concerns. This happened on February 9th, in short, Ontario forced CLFN into the courts.”

Chief Wesley raised safety concerns, citing Ontario issuing FMG overland winter road permits while CLFN lacks year-round road access, putting them at risk on hazardous winter roads with water crossing made more treacherous and unpredictable by climate change. He criticized the prioritization of miner safety over the well-being of CLFN community members by Premier Ford’s government. This, in his view, underscores the inequality in how safety considerations are weighed.

The Chief observed that the current provincial Environmental Assessment (EA) process is basically unresponsive to typical First Nation circumstances. Many First Nations have minimal technical capacity and are asked to respond quickly to a veritable deluge of complex application. The Chief underscored the need for improvements in the provincial Environmental Assessment process, advocating for changes through Bill 162: Get It Done Act, 2024 to ensure Ontario First Nations can adequately respond with the necessary time and resources.

The Chief concluded, "I trust that CLFN's unwavering commitment to safeguarding our Aboriginal Lands can serve as encouragement for other First Nations grappling with similar obstacles and contending with external forces like Ontario. While disheartening, I foresee a trend where First Nations are increasingly forced into the court room to protect the land, heritage, and overall welfare of indigenous communities in the face of provincial government pressures. We want free, prior and informed consent".

For media inquiries of to schedule an interview with Chief Russell Wesley contact: **Vicki Blanchard, Cat Lake First Nation Advisor at 807-220-3585 or blanchardvicki21@gmail.com**

Cat Lake First Nation (CLFN) is a remote fly-in First Nation reserve. It is home to 800 people speaking Ojibwe and English located 180 km northwest of Sioux Lookout, Ontario, The Ojibwe name is Bizhiw-zaaga'iganiing Nitam Anishinaabeg meaning "The First Nation at Wild-Cat Lake," where wild-cat refers to the [Canada lynx](#). CLFN is a member of the Windigo First Nations Council, a non-political regional chiefs' council. In turn, the Windigo First Nations Council is a member of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation which represents 49, Treaty 9 communities.

In late November 2023, Cat Lake First Nation Chief Russell Wesley addressed the Chiefs of Ontario (COO) conference (representing the 133 Ontario First Nation communities) in Toronto. During his speech, Chief Wesley unveiled a button that represents the strength and resilience of the Cat Lake First Nation community, as well as their unwavering commitment to defending their land and culture. COO passed a Resolution supporting Cat Lake First Nation at the Fall Chiefs Assembly on November 23, 2023



The button depicts Premier Doug Ford on a bulldozer being observed by Lynx cats, symbolizing the ongoing struggle between the Cat Lake First Nation and the Province of Ontario. The caption "Cat Lake First Nation Strong" and "Defend Land and Culture" underscore the community's determination to protect their ancestral lands and stand up against encroachment.