



January 17, 2023

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation express disappointment in the Yukon Government's *policy for the stewardship of wetlands*

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Na-Cho Nyäk Dun are discouraged by the Yukon Government's *policy for the stewardship of wetlands*, released January 10, 2023, which fails to address First Nation's concerns.

The traditional territories of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Na-Cho Nyäk Dun are home to some of the most vulnerable and rare wetland types in the Yukon. Despite their rarity and significance, these sensitive habitats are under constant threat from destruction. In many areas, such as the Indian River Valley, important wetland classes are already at risk of extinction, having faced relentless and unfettered devastation from mining over the last several decades. Once peatlands like bogs and fens are destroyed, these important landscapes will not return.

Wetlands perform many critical ecological functions: they purify freshwater, store carbon, control flooding and provide habitat for a wide range of wildlife, fish, and plants. Wetlands support cultural uses and activities such as hunting, trapping, and fishing. The *policy for the stewardship of wetlands* acknowledges the various and important benefits provided by wetlands yet fails to expeditiously protect these important ecosystems.

Yukon Government's *policy for the stewardship of wetlands* has not applied a protection first approach to wetlands. Instead, while acknowledging that there exists a minimal understanding of benefits, location, type, and extent of wetlands across the Yukon, this policy allows for continued development of all wetland classes and offers minimal guidance as to when and how impacts can be avoided and/or mitigated. The protection mechanisms that are offered, remain administratively burdensome, and the process lacks effective protective measures for wetlands of special importance.

The impact of a changing climate on wetlands, and the significant role these ecosystems will play in our race against time to prevent or limit catastrophic harm from climate change, is of particular concern. Peatlands remain a major carbon storehouse, holding carbon that has accumulated over thousands of years. The destruction of carbon rich peatlands allowed under this policy, will release significant amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, further undermining our collective ability to fight climate change. The cumulative loss of these important ecosystems, and the impacts this is having on our culture and our Final Agreement rights, cannot be overstated.

The alteration and dramatic changes that occur to the landscape once wetlands have been mined alienates our citizens from our own land and interferes with our ability to exercise treaty rights for hunting, fishing, and enjoying other spiritual and cultural activities.

"Our culture is passed down onto future generations through these activities, and as we are further removed from the land, we are further removed from our culture. If we are unable to perform traditional activities that rely on the undisturbed, natural existence of wetlands, our culture and our identity may be lost forever. This is in breach of our Treaty with the Crown."



As such, we urge Yukon Government to reconsider their policy and to work with Yukon First Nations to jointly develop, and approve, a policy for wetlands that we can all support. We urge Yukon Government to respect and uphold our constitutionally protected Final Agreement rights, and to honour our deeply rooted and ancestral responsibility to protect these rare and critical ecosystems by enacting proactive protective and effective measures now, not later.

QUOTES

“Yukon Government’s wetlands policy is unacceptable, and our First Nation rejects it. The policy was developed unilaterally by public government. The deep concerns expressed by Na-Cho Nyäk Dun were almost entirely ignored. Our comments at the Yukon Water Board hearing fell on deaf ears. The rights to water enshrined in Chapter 14 of our modern treaty are being eroded. This continues a pattern of Yukon First Nations being treated—at best—as stakeholders on our own lands and in our own territories. This policy is inconsistent with a respectful, government-to-government relationship among the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, and the Governments of Canada and Yukon. We call on Yukon Government to rescind the policy and to return to the table with a commitment to truly co-developing a new wetlands policy that respects our Treaty rights and protects the waters and wetlands of our territory for our future generations.” – Chief Mervyn, Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation

“Despite multiple years of engagement with Yukon Government on the objectives and direction of this policy, we have not been heard. We have always advocated for a protections first approach, acknowledging the rarity and significance of these important ecosystems on the land. We have also always asked that our role as managers of resources within our traditional territory be emphasized through the co-development and joint approval of the policy. We did not see this happen, and we now find ourselves with a final policy approved by Yukon Government alone that has not honoured the spirit and intent of our Final Agreement.” – Chief Joseph, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation.

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First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun will accept live interviews only.
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