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ONTARIO REGIONAL CHIEF SAYS CANADA AND USA MUST RECOGNIZE FIRST/TRIBAL NATIONS LIKE THE POTAWATOMI AT THE NAFTA TABLE

(Walpole Island, Ontario, August 4, 2017) The Ontario Regional Chief is meeting with the Potawatomi to learn about how trade, economy, culture and self-determination are vital to the survival of Indigenous Nations on Turtle Island.

The Potawatomi people are meeting in the Unceded Territory of Walpole Island, known as Bkejwanong, (where the rivers divide.) This is 17th Annual Gathering. Bkejwanong is located in the St. Clair River system, and is home to the Three Fires Confederacy People, the Ojibway, Odawa and the Potawatomi. Their historical economy and trade have existed from time immemorial and before colonial contact; before there was a Canada/United States border.

The Anishinabe and Potawatomi peoples have settled in various parts of Canada and the United States, forming economies vital to their Nations and the Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibway, Odawa, and Potawatomi.

At a meeting today in Bkejwanong, the tribal leaders are talking about trade and economy. The sentiment is one of strong determination and rights assertion, with the intent toward survival of Nationhood rights like title to Ancestral lands, languages and political recognition and autonomy.

In this discussion Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day, an Assembly of First Nations executive member, is carrying a message notifying the Anishinabe and Potawatomi peoples, that talks between Canada and the US have ensued focusing on North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). These dialogue sessions, which commence this month, are essential trade and economy discussions that must include formal standing and recognition of Indigenous Nations/Tribes. These matters are beyond token representation.

"The Potawatomi people are one of many Indigenous Nations that have socio-economic and political rights that must be recognized in NAFTA simply because those rights have always been asserted and preserved as sovereign, meaning these rights are autonomous and not confined by colonial government policy and law," says Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day.

The Potawatomi people assert their position that "as the rights holders, we (they) will speak on their own behalf on issues regarding NAFTA." Chief Dan Miskokomon further stated that "Ontario Regional Chief's statement support and reaffirms our rights. The Potawatomi people inherently own both sides of the St. Clair River prior to confederation or delineation of the nation-state borders of Canada/US, and our Inherent and Treaty rights must be brought into the NAFTA context."

Issues like softwood lumber, agriculture, gaming, communications - these are just some economic activities that have socio-economic impacts on tribes and First Nations, and must be acknowledged as a matter of sovereignty and recognition of constitutional rights transcending the Canada / US border.

New economies and existing relationships between Indigenous Nations and Tribes tie together an opportunity for inter-tribal trade across a border established that would separate pre-existing Indigenous trading territories.

Article 36 of the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states: Indigenous peoples, in particular those divided by international borders, have the right to maintain and develop contacts, relations and cooperation, including activities for spiritual, cultural, political, economic and social purposes, with their own members as well as other peoples across borders.

"National Chief Perry Bellegarde of the Assembly of First Nations has been invited to sit at the NAFTA table as one of an assortment of Advisors. This can be seen as a good inclusion provided that Canada, US and Mexico realize that Indigenous Tribes across North America cannot be represented by a single individual. Rather, many Nations and Tribes expect their voices to be recognized and respected in NAFTA negotiations - or NAFTA will surely be incomplete and seen as illegitimate by First Nations and Tribes," continues Day. "This important trade agreement on Turtle Island must reflect that Indigenous trading relationships require inclusion and promotion."

Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day, who is an Anishinabe from the Robinson Huron Treaty of 1850, a treaty between the British Crown before Confederation, says that the treaties like his and the 1795 Jay Treaty are evidence that Indigenous rights are constitutional priorities holding the highest legal value and must be respected in NAFTA negotiations. Pre-confederation treaty holders have strong ties to the Jay Treaty because many of those treaties were treaties of military alliance and trade. He also says that while it seems Canada is opening a door to Nations participation in NAFTA, he believes Canada, the US and Mexico must recognize the full spectrum of rights of First Nations and Tribes in trade and equal sharing of the economic bounty of Turtle Island, now referred to as North America.

"My goal in sitting with the Potawatomi people is to learn what is important to them in the area of self-determination, trade, and economic rights," says Day, "I am also committed to bringing forward the concerns and economic sentiment of the Potawatomi leadership to the AFN Executive and National Chief, reinforcing that Nations must have their own voice and autonomy in NAFTA when it comes to their ancestral lands and economic rights."

Article III of the Jay Treaty states:

"It is agreed that at all Times be free to His Majesty's Subjects, and to the Citizens of the United States, and also to the Indians dwelling on either side of said Boundary Line freely to pass and re-pass by Land, or Inland Navigation, into the respective Territories and Countries of the Two Parties on the Continent of America (the Country within the Limits of the Hudson's Bay Company only excepted) and to navigate all the Lakes, Rivers and waters thereof, and freely to carry on trade and commerce with each other..."

...No Duty of Entry shall ever be levied by either Party on Peltries brought by Land, or Inland Navigation into the said Territories respectively, nor shall the Indians passing or re-passing with their own proper Goods and Effects of whatever nature, pay for the same any Import or Duty whatever. But Goods in Bales, or other large Packages unusual among the Indians shall not be considered as Goods belonging bona fide to Indians."

The NAFTA discussions are similar today, with the additional onus of both Canada and the US agreeing to ratify UNDRIP, and by doing so, must acknowledge Jay's Treaty as a valid foundational law affecting trade."

The status of North America's Indigenous Peoples such as the Potawatomi Nation, whose trade practices were recognized well before NAFTA must factor into the dialogue.

Day says that NAFTA must not go forward without full recognition of constitutional protected rights of Indigenous Peoples in North America and the implementation of the United Nations Declaration in the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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The Chiefs of Ontario is an advocacy forum, and a secretariat for collective decision making, action, and advocacy for the 133 First Nation communities located within the boundaries of the province of Ontario, Canada.

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