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WLFN Announces Historic Village Claim Ratification Vote

Williams Lake First Nation (WLFN) Chief and Council today announced that WLFN has reached agreement-in-principle with the Government of Canada on the settlement of a long-standing specific claim that has been the subject matter of legal dispute for nearly thirty years. WLFN Members over the age of eighteen will now have the opportunity to vote on the proposed settlement in a referendum to be conducted on June 29, 2022.

The factual basis for the WLFN specific claim arises out the unlawful displacement of the ancestors of the current WLFN members from large tracts of land within what is now the City of Williams Lake. In 1859 WLFN's leader, Chief William, gave permission to a settler to build a cabin and cultivate a garden on these WLFN lands, known as the "village lands". Additional settlers followed, and over the next several years most of the WLFN village lands were taken by settlers through a process called "pre-emption." The pre-emptions were contrary to Colonial Law, and occurred despite the fact that the colonial government had committed to create an Indian Reserve to protect the village lands.

WLFN's pursuit of justice for the unlawful eviction from the village lands began in 1994, when WLFN submitted a specific claim to Canada in accordance with Canada's Specific Claims Policy. Canada rejected the claim, and WLFN was forced to advance the claim through two further levels of quasi-judicial process known as the "Indian Claims Commission" and the "Specific Claims Tribunal." In 2014, the Specific Claims Tribunal ruled in favour of WLFN, asserting that Canada had breached its obligations to the people of WLFN by allowing them to be unlawfully evicted from their traditional lands. The decision of the Specific Claims Tribunal was appealed by Canada, sparking another four years of legal dispute within the Canadian court system. Finally, in 2018 the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in favour of WLFN and affirmed the decision of the Specific Claims Tribunal. There was no further avenue for appeal available to Canada.

For three years, WLFN and Canada worked at negotiating a settlement to address the amount of damages payable to WLFN in satisfaction of its claim. In January of 2021, Canada and WLFN reached an agreement-in-principle to resolve the claim for the amount of \$135 million and the finalization of the settlement agreement and associated documentation took another fourteen months to complete.

"The proposed settlement of our village claim is the culmination of more than 160 years of effort by our people to obtain some form of justice from the Government of Canada," asserts WLFN Councillor, Chris Wycotte. "Our people were unlawfully displaced from lands where they had resided for thousands of years. We lost our homes, we lost our burial sites, we lost our spiritual sites, we lost lands that were



critical for our sustenance and survival. For decades, our people starved in the hills before the Government of Canada was able to assemble lands by buying them back from settlers. Even then, these reserve lands were not our traditional lands within the City of Williams Lake. What Canada did was wrong, and they made us battle through every tribunal and court in this country to obtain justice. It took almost thirty years to do this, and it cost our community hundreds of thousands of dollars to fight this fight, but it's gratifying to be in a place where we can now offer some form of resolution to our people."

To ensure that current and future WLFN members obtain a lasting benefit from the settlement, WLFN is proposing that the settlement funds be held and disbursed through a WLFN community trust. The trust would be professionally managed, and funds could only be removed from the trust in accordance with the rules established by the trust agreement.

"Our intention is to create a legacy for our community that will be properly managed and sustained forever," adds WLFN Chief, Willie Sellars. "It took 160 years to obtain justice, and this settlement should be used to provide benefits for generations of WLFN members in the future. Every member will receive annual benefits through the proposed trust, and income generated by the trust could also be used to enhance programs and services and infrastructure. WLFN has already worked very hard to improve the welfare of our community, and this settlement will assist us in making further strides. Reconciliation is about healing – it's about leveling the playing field so that our people have the same opportunities for education, housing, employment, and all other amenities as non-Indigenous Canadians. We intend to continue to invest in our community and this settlement, if properly managed, will allow us to do that forever."

The proposed settlement must now be ratified by WLFN members over the age of eighteen through a referendum, which will take place on June 29, 2022. A series of membership information meetings will be held in May and June to discuss the proposed settlement and settlement trust.

For more information on the proposed settlement agreement, please visit www.wlfn.ca/village-claim

- 30 -

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