

# Chief threatens action over protected island

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THE chief of Sapatawayak Cree Nation is threatening legal action after the provincial government decided to yank Pemmican Island's protected status and open up the northwest island for mining exploration.

Chief Nelson Genaille said he is prepared to take the province to court and file an injunction if he doesn't get answers from the provincial government about its plans for the island, which has been a protected park reserve since 2001.

"The legal proceeding will start soon enough... if they don't follow the rules about duty to consult and accommodate," Genaille said. "If we see a mining truck... We will physically stop them, if we have to."

The provincial government sent a letter to the Manitoba chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) on Dec. 20, informing CPAWS it had allowed the island's park reserve designation to "expire" as of Dec. 14, clearing the way for mining exploration

on the island located about 175 kilometres north of Dauphin.

Genaille said he has received no communication from the provincial government and only found out about the decision from the media.

"It (impacts) the food we eat and the water we drink," Genaille said. His First Nation has reserves near the mainland of the island.

The island is only about 55 acres in size and located near the western shore of central Lake Winnipegosis.

"We'd like to know how the Manitoba government plans on pursuing the protection of the island for its conservation values while simultaneously allowing it to be damaged by mining exploration activities," said Ron Thiessen, the executive director of CPAWS.

The island is believed to have moderate-grade nickel and zinc ore deposits, but it also provides habitat to multiple migratory bird species, including nesting grounds for double-crested cormorants, Thiessen said.

Thiessen and Genaille raised concerns about the threat to Lake Winni-

pegosis, which surrounds the island and also drains into Lake Winnipeg's northern basin. Exploration on the island could lead to chemical spills as waste is transported off the island, as well as the threat of chemical-filled "mining pods" leaking into the water, explained Thiessen.

"The recovery of Lake Winnipeg and the health of our fisheries will be put at great risk if Pemmican Island and its lake bed become an industrial mining operation," he said.

In a prepared statement, Sustainable Development Minister Cathy Cox said her department and the Growth, Enterprise and Trade department will begin discussions with relevant indigenous communities impacted by the mining in the New Year.

"The departments will work closely with industry partners to ensure minimal impact on the island and its associated habitat so that possible permanent protection can be pursued once exploration is complete," Cox said.

"This decision reflects the government's commitment to finding the right

balance between protecting our natural areas with the need for mineral exploration and the sustainable growth of Manitoba's economy."

Sustainable Development critic Rob Altemeyer said the Opposition NDP isn't opposed to mining exploration, but is concerned the lack of consultation could create a lengthy court battle.

"First and foremost, the local First Nations community has made it clear that they want these islands protected," he said. "If the Pallister government is not only going against those wishes and now if they fail to conduct proper consultations, the whole thing could end up in court and no one is going to win."

The Sustainable Development department announced in the same letter two nearby islands — Goose and Grand islands — would see their protected status continue for a six-month period to allow for continued discussions regarding the permanent protection of those sites.

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