

Groups, MLAs roast government's Peel principles

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The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) says it expected more from the Yukon government than the principles it has unveiled for the Peel watershed's future.

If finalized, the eight new principles would permit roads, uranium, coal and hard rock mining, and oil and gas development in what CPAWS terms one of the last intact boreal ecosystems on the continent.

"We hoped for more from the (Premier Darrell) Pasloski government, but it is following the same unilateral approach used by the previous (Dennis) Fentie government," said Mike Dehn, the executive director of CPAWS' Yukon chapter.

"The government says it listens to the public, but then tosses out seven years of sound work and does what it wants.

"It is a reckless approach that puts government and the mining industry at odds with the wishes of the public and First Nations. That just provokes protests and, potentially, long, drawn-out lawsuits, which is poison to potential investors in the territory."

The government's move also runs counter to treaties signed with First Nations 17 years ago this week, CPAWS says.

"The government says it respects the First Nation final agreements, but this makes a mockery of that assertion," said Dehn.

"The original six principles were drafted collaboratively and were based upon the Umbrella Final Agreement. They have shaped the discussion so far.

"Now, the government has concocted new principles, without any discussion with its partners, to simply gut a plan it doesn't like."

The final land use plan sets aside 55 per cent of the Peel watershed as protected areas.

Another 25 per cent of the region is assigned less secure interim wilderness protection that could be developed in the future.

Twenty per cent of the region, an area more than twice the size of Prince Edward Island, would be open to development.

"(The) Yukon government talks about balance, but the land use planning commission has already produced a balanced plan," said Karen Baltgailis, executive director of the Yukon Conservation Society.

"It not only balances interests in the Peel, but counterbalances rampant development happening throughout the territory.

"It's clear the government is hiding behind a set of arbitrary principles it has concocted to dupe the public.

"This is nothing more than an attempt to gut the recommended plan and to start the whole process from scratch. I don't think that Yukon people will be fooled."

Opposition Leader Liz Hanson said the government's move "shows contempt for process, and is a betrayal to First Nation governments and all Yukoners.

"The rejection of the final recommended Peel land use plan is the rejection of the collective efforts and wisdom of thousands of Yukoners who engaged in the process," she said.

"It shows contempt for due process and First Nation final agreements. It's a slap in the face to all Yukoners who contributed to the planning process over the previous eight years."

During the 2011 territorial election campaign, Pasloski refused to say where he stood on the final recommended plan. He argued that further consultation with Yukoners was required before the government's position could be disclosed, Hanson recalled.

"The government's rejection of the plan this week, without any further consultation, shows that the premier misled Yukoners," said the NDP leader.

"The premier fed Yukoners the line that process required further public consultation before his position could be made known," said Hanson.

The government's principles are silent on tourism and recreational, cultural and traditional land uses in the Peel region, she added.

Jim Tredger, the NDP's Energy, Mines and Resources critic, predicts "land use uncertainty and conflict" as a likely outcome of "this irresponsible decision."

It also undermines future land use planning processes, Tredger said.

"Why would First Nations and other Yukoners bother to engage when the government might again dismiss their opinions and efforts and redraw the process at the 11th hour?" asked Tredger, whose Mayo-Tatchun riding includes much of the Peel region.

"We know that the majority of Yukoners support the final recommended Peel land use plan.

"We call on those Yukoners to contact the premier, their MLAs and the media to express their support for the plan. Yukoners made their vision for the Peel clear, but the Yukon Party government didn't listen.

"The Yukon is not for sale to the highest bidder. Yukoners will be heard."

Planning commission head Dave Loeks told the Star Thursday the government's production of the principles shows it's willing to circumvent the planning process to do as it pleases.

A spokesman for the Yukon Chamber of Mines said it cannot comment on the specifics of what has transpired until after the management strategy has been finalized.