

# Full house for devolution hearing

Critics question rolling super board into legislation for transfer of powers to NWT

by Laura Busch  
Northern News Services

The Explorer Hotel has been the site of numerous historical meetings over the course of NWT history, and was so again on Monday, as Northerners seized their opportunity to tell the federal government what they think of the legislation that would enact the devolution of lands and resources and overhaul the current regulatory system, Bill C-15.

The decision to include regulatory reform, which would overhaul the territory's regulatory regime under the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act, with devolution in a single omnibus bill was the main cause of concern during the marathon parliamentary committee hearing.

Over nine hours, MPs from the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development held court and heard testimony from 33 witnesses who had been invited to give their thoughts on the federal bill.

A very animated Premier Bob McLeod started the day off at 8:30 a.m., voicing thunderous support for devolution, Bill C-15, and regulatory reform. "Whatever their views on this specific legislation, I hope that everybody in the Northwest Territories supports its basic premise, that decisions about the

North should be made as close to home as possible," he said.

He urged both Northerners and legislators present not to let the controversial changes to the regulatory system delay, "the devolution we have been seeking for so long."

McLeod has not publicly criticized the federal government's proposed changes to the resource management act, yet also hasn't outwardly supported it. His fall-back position has been to insist devolution is essential to the territory and that regulatory reform is a national priority.

Many witnesses called for the two issues to be separated and debated in Parliament on their own merits. Aside from the GNWT representatives, federal government contractors Neil McCrank and John Polard, representatives from the NWT and Nunavut Chamber of Mines and NWT Chamber of Commerce, Inuvik Mayor



**Bob McLeod**

Floyd Roland and newly-appointed Northwest Territories Association of Communities president Tina Gargan, all witnesses strongly opposed the elimination of the regional land and water boards and perceived meddling on the part of the federal government to "fix what isn't broken."

The Yellowknife-based social policy and environment-

al groups Alternatives North and Ecology North made a joint presentation opposing the proposed super board.

"There is no proof (the changes to the resource management act) will help, it will probably hurt," said Christine Wenman of Ecology North.

The federal government has never replied to two internal audits conducted in 2005 and 2010 and instead based its regulatory overhaul on federally-commissioned reports, they alleged.



**Floyd Roland**

"(The audits) contained clear, consistent and largely ignored recommendations for improving environmental management in the NWT," said Wenman.

They also pointed out that powers being given to the federal minister under the resource management act, such as the power to appoint the board chair, risks politicizing a system that is intended to be arms-length and quasi-judicial.

Several witnesses pointed to unsettled land claims as to the cause of holdups in the regulatory process and said other past delays had nothing to do with the board structure or the regional land and water boards.

Mackenzie Valley Land and Water Board chair Willard Hagen refused to wade into the political debate surrounding the overhaul, saying

it is the job of board members and staff to uphold the legislation, and that politics should be left up to politicians.

"We are a public body and we are neutral," he told Yellowknifer.

However, during his testimony he pointed out that of the 61 referrals that have come to the board for approval, 53 were from the territory's unsettled regions.

**Aboriginal partners oppose super board**

Every one of the 10 aboriginal government leaders who testified strongly opposed Bill C-15, mostly because of the proposed changes to the resource management act.

The two regional governments who have yet to settle their land claims, the Akaitcho near Yellowknife and the Decho in the southern Mackenzie Valley.



**Edward Sangris**

Speaking on behalf of the NWT Treaty 8 Tribal Corporation, Ndilo Chief Edward Sangris said the Akaitcho First Nations "cannot agree to the legislation as it now sits," because they have yet to settle a land claim.

Roughly \$15 billion worth of resources have been extracted from Chief Drygeese Territory (Akaitcho land) so far, and without a land claim the First Nation has not received the benefits it should, said chief negotiator

Don Balsillie.

Since the mid-1930s, there have been well over a dozen mines built on Akaitcho Territory, including Giant, Con, Thompson-Lundmark, Ruth, Ptarmigan, and Discovery gold mines. Yet the First Nation did not receive a penny until the first impact benefit agreement was signed with BHP Billiton's Ekati diamond mine in 1996 and to this day, there has been no resource revenue sharing between NWT aboriginal governments and industry or the Government of Canada.

**Industry partners favour changes**

Aside from McLeod and the three participating Conservative MPs, witnesses from pro-industry organizations spoke favourably of the entirety of Bill C-15.

"Is Bill C-15 perfect?" asked NWT and Nunavut Chamber of Mines executive director Tom Hoefer. "No, but nothing visionary is every perfect."

In the opinion of the Chamber of Mines and the NWT Chamber of Commerce, a single board has worked in the Yukon and will make companies more willing to invest

in the NWT.

This was not a typical committee hearing for participating MPs Ryan Leef, Dennis Bevington, Mark Strahl, Curtix Wakentin and Yvonne Jones.

The roughly 130 chairs that had been set up in the Katimavik room were filled to capacity several times throughout the day, with more people standing around the back and even more milling in the small lobby and peeking in through the doors. At other times -- such as during the sixth of seven panels featuring the NWT and Nunavut Chamber of Mines, the Northwest Territories Chamber of Commerce and the Northern Territories Federation of Labour -- as few as a dozen members of the public were present.

Members of the media present at the meeting were barred from taking photos.

Committee members will now go through the hundreds of comments and proposed amendments they have received from the public before debating and deciding on what amendments they will propose to Parliament.

But before that work can be complete, further hearings are scheduled in Ottawa next month.



**FISHING EXPEDITION**

Lakes in the region may be frozen solid, but that does not stop Jake Edward, 2, from embarking on a make-believe fishing expedition during a visit to the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre on Friday afternoon. Edward enjoyed a real-life boat ride last summer with some family friends.

Daron Letts/NNSL photo

*Thank You!*

**Office Compliments and Arctic West Adjusters**

would like to thank the Yellowknife business community for the support received during the past couple of weeks.

Staff and management at both our companies lost a co-worker and friend.

The support received during this time of loss is greatly appreciated.

**Thank you.**

