

**ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE**

**QUESTION 334-19(2):  
EDEHZHIE NATIONAL WILDLIFE AREA**

**June 12, 2020**

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. While we've been sitting here, I think one of the best news pieces I've had in the 19<sup>th</sup> Assembly arrived in my inbox. I want to commend the Premier for the leadership on this issue, and her Cabinet. We just got a news release about a permanent land withdrawal for the subsurface on the Edehzhie Protected Area. Thank you, and thanks to the Premier and Cabinet. This is a very significant move in terms of reconciliation, so I sincerely want to thank my Cabinet colleagues and the Premier for the leadership on this issue.

My question, Mr. Speaker: can the Premier provide the House and the public with an update about the permanent land withdrawal order for Edehzhie because it doesn't contain an end date anymore? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Honourable Premier.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to start by thanking the honourable Member as well, the MLA, for recognizing the hard work that this Cabinet has done for this. We committed to trying to foster better relationships, and we are committed. We're working hard at that.

The reason it doesn't have an end date on it is because the Dehcho First Nations asked us for that. There were several requests from them and Environment and Climate Change Canada to implement an interim land withdrawal to achieve permanent protection of the subsurface land associated with the Edehzhie National Wildlife area. We understand that, renewing the withdrawal without an expiry date, the Dehcho First Nation will be in a better position to secure funding to support future management in this Edehzhie Park. Again, it was something that was asked. It was something that we all agreed to. The next step in that is the land use planning. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks, very much to the Premier for that. According to the Government of Canada webpage, it says that Edehzhie will be established as a national park area under the Canada Wildlife Act in 2020. That's this year. I think the permanent withdrawal is helpful, but what we really need is the transfer of the lands back to the federal government, or perhaps some other arrangement to prevent this from being undone in the future. Can the Premier tell us whether we're still on schedule for the establishment as Edehzhie as a National Wildlife Area, and what role this government intends to play?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Environment and Climate Change Canada will begin the consultation process to establish it as a National Wildlife Area. However, due to COVID-19 and the amount of work that the federal government is doing, there might be a little delay with that, although we are trying to get this moved forward as fast as possible. They know it's important to all of us, so we've stressed that as we go forward.

Hopefully, the GNWT's currently in discussions with the Dehcho First Nations, and is interested in playing a role in the management of the park as we go forward. Like I said, we're at the table. We're all working together. Canada is interested in moving this forward, the Dehcho First Nations and the GNWT. This is a very successful achievement that we've made so early in our government.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Premier again. I just would like to get a better understanding of why the establishment of Edehzhie is contingent upon the Dehcho Land Use Plan.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: What I can say is that, when I first became the Premier and the Minister of Executive and Indigenous Affairs, I flew in, back in those days when we could actually fly, and had a meeting with the Grand Chief and her council and talked about it. At that point, I had realized that this park was taken off the table as kind of a negotiating thing, was my understanding. I didn't feel that was fair, so they asked me to put it back on, and I agreed.

I feel that it's important, if we're going to build a relationship, Mr. Speaker, we need to be willing to give something, and at that point, I said, "Yes, we will work with you," and then, in future talks, they've agreed to work with us on a land use plan. It's the start of a positive relationship. It is time for change. Everyone is saying that, and we are doing our best. We will have arguments; it is not going to be easy, but we are doing our best to work to settle all of the outstanding issues between the GNWT and the Indigenous governments.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Honourable Premier. Final supplementary, Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Premier again. I think this is a very significant step forward. Part of my concern here is that the Dehcho Land Use Plan has been in development for 19, count them, 19 years, and at first, the obstacle was the federal government because they owned the land, and the GNWT was at the table, but now the obstacle is our government. We own the land, and our government is the obstacle. I have heard this from people involved in the process. The concern is too much land being protected and so on. You have to give the communities the right to decide what they are going to do with that land. Eventually, if they wanted it used for different purposes, that's their decision to make.

My question to the Premier is: can you tell us why this has taken 19 years to get the Dehcho Land Use Plan to the point it is, and will our government get out of the way and finally approve this plan so that we can move forward? Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: I can't say why it's taken 19 years. It wasn't my file before, I certainly haven't been in this House for 19 years, and I don't want to make assumptions. What I do know is that, when I assumed this portfolio, I was told by the Dehcho First Nations that there were issues with the relationship. We are trying to mend those relationships.

It would be easy for me, Mr. Speaker, to say, "I will stand back and let you do what you want." However, there is a public interest as well, and the Dehcho First Nations

recognizes that. We are going into this as partners in this, and we will do our best to make sure that this is dealt with in the committed three years. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.