

This is How We Make Reconciliation a Reality

By Chief Raymond Powder

Leading Fort McKay First Nation is the highest honour and greatest commitment of my life. This is my home, a small, dynamic community on the banks of the Athabasca River, sixty kilometres north of Fort McMurray. We are business innovators and environmental stewards. For many years, we have been leaders in combining care for our lands with opportunity and enterprise. Indeed, FMFN has, through much hard work, dedication and many lessons learned, forged a model for a new way forward – one from which Alberta and Canada can also benefit.

Since the Indian Act became the law in Canada in 1876, the First Nations of this country have lived under a system that denied us the prosperity that should have flowed from our land and our rights. That is now changing, at long last, and we are the ones changing it. This is how we define reconciliation.

That model will now be put to the test, as we work towards the development of a resource on our own lands, in accordance with promises and commitments made to us a generation ago. It is a project that, if done as we intend, will be an exemplar for remaining projects in the oil sands, as Alberta and Canada transition towards renewable energy and a net-zero future.

The most important fact in our story is this: The property which we propose to develop cannot, according to the Treaty Land Entitlement Agreement between Canada and Fort McKay, be used for any purpose other than oilsands development or related industrial activities. It is surrounded on all sides by existing projects. We must either use it or lose it, as the window of opportunity to develop fossil fuel resources gradually closes.

Can we do this in a way that reflects our shared values of environmental stewardship and leadership? The answer is, categorically and absolutely, yes.

For starters, as people of the Athabasca Watershed, we live every day the urgency of finding a solution to the various impacts of development on our lands. The problem of tailings ponds is one of cumulative impacts and is of utmost importance. We have been working hard on this for a several years. We believe we are making progress. And we are confident we will find an economically viable way to treat tailings and reclaim the land. We are compelled to do this. Our people will accept nothing less. In order to do this work, we need to continue to be at the table.

Second, we are deeply engaged in working towards a net-zero emissions barrel of oil, including through the landmark carbon-off-set project on our lands at Moose Lake, and detailed project analyses designed to offset mine emissions at every stage. We are also planning to join the Pathways Alliance, as we work to off-set emissions from our project operations. The Pathways

commitment to net zero emissions by 2050 is, we believe, an important first step. We can make even greater progress, and we will.

Some will maintain there should be no further development at all in the oil sands. The reality is that non-Indigenous-owned oil sands development is projected to continue for decades to come. Ours is, to our knowledge, the only Indigenous-owned oil sands project currently proposed in Alberta. So in effect, the choice is not whether to develop or not develop; it is whether First Nations will have a share of the benefits. For we did not create the conditions that established mining in the oil patch. Nor did Indigenous people create climate change.

What Fort McKay First Nation has done, on the contrary, is worked hard as a collaborative, reliable partner, knowing that our people require jobs, a safe place to call home, and a future. That is why we are working with industry to establish relationships. We believe our unique vantage point as First Nations business leaders, and environmental champions, makes us ideally positioned to lead.

In consultation with our regional neighbours and our partners, we intend to demonstrate what economic reconciliation *truly* looks like in practice: creating opportunity for our people and prosperity for Albertans and Canadian alike. In the process, we can lead the way in finding solutions to the most pressing environmental problems we face.

It has been clear for many years that economic development is fundamental to the natural right of Indigenous peoples to achieve our full potential and an equal seat at the table. First Nations in Canada are still waiting for that seat at the table. But there are signs this may finally be changing. We see ideas like the Indigenous Loan Guarantee program, which we support, adopted in last Fall's federal economic statement. And we see proposals like the First Nations Resource Charge, initiated by the First Nations Tax Commission and now taken up by politicians in Ottawa. These ideas are intended to finally give our people more of the benefits of development on our land. It's a welcome shift and one that is long overdue.

Indigenous peoples should not — in fact, cannot — wait any longer to shape the future we all need. We are trail blazers charting a new path today, based on our business acumen and the innovative vitality of our people. We ask the people of Alberta and Canada to join us.