

BTL blockades winter road to stop mineral developers

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STAFF WRITER

TENSION between mineral developers and Northwestern Ontario First Nations came to a head last week in Big Trout Lake First Nation (Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation).

Members of the First Nation blockaded a winter road last Wednesday in an effort to stop Platinex Inc. from continuing mineral exploration of a platinum deposit roughly 25 kilometers southwest of the community.

Although 10 Platinex workers had already set up a small camp at the site, the goal of the blockade was to stop the movement of further equipment.

While Platinex owns the claims and leases on the property, the First Nation maintains that it is situated on their traditional land, and further exploration could lead to environmental degradation.

The dispute is the latest escalation in the often rocky relationship between Platinex and Big Trout Lake which began eight years ago when Platinex started seeking the rights to mineral exploration near the community.

In October of last year the

chiefs of Big Trout Lake, Muskrat Dam, Wapekeka, and Wawakapewin declared a moratorium on mining exploration and forestry in their traditional territories.

After several rounds of talks between Platinex and Big Trout Lake failed to resolve the issue, Platinex went ahead with exploration starting the week of February 18.

Chief Donnie Morris of Big Trout Lake immediately condemned the move.

"What is contained in my land is a non-renewable resource," said Morris. "Once it is taken out it is gone forever."

The blockade has received the support of many Northwestern Ontario chiefs, included Nishnawbe-Aski Nation Grand Chief Stan Beardy.

"We had high expectations after the November 2005 Mikisew Supreme Court decision regarding Crown duty to consult with and accommodate First Nations when activities like mining threaten our Aboriginal and treaty rights," said Beardy. "The fact that Ontario has not implemented this decision in our province sets the tone for First Nation and government relations for resource development in NAN territory."

Although Big Trout Lake



Submitted Photo

Protestors in Big Trout Lake voiced their displeasure last week with the commencement of mineral exploration 25 kilometres from the community. Big Trout Lake Chief Donnie Morris and a group of supporters also initiated a blockade of the winter road to stop further equipment from reaching the site.

operates its own police service, members of the OPP, including some from the Sioux Lookout detachment, were deployed to the area to keep watch on the volatile situation.

"When we became aware that there was the potential to have a blockade of the winter road, we deployed resources to the community of Big Trout to monitor the situation," said Thunder Bay OPP Sgt. Deb Tully. "They will be available, should the need arise, to provide resources with regard to public safety issues."

While Tully declined to give the exact number of officers deployed to Big Trout Lake, she confirmed that Sioux Lookout OPP

Staff Sgt. Connie Capovilla was among them.

While Platinex has claimed the police presence was necessary to deal with threats against its workers, Big Trout Lake spokesperson John Cutfeet said the presence of the OPP is doing more harm than good.

"We've been told by the OPP that the extra officers have been brought in to keep the peace in the community, however their presence, particularly the vehicle checks of those coming or leaving the community, has created increased tension," said Cutfeet. "When will the lessons of Ipperwash be learned?"

Cutfeet said the blame for the current situation in Big Trout Lake falls squarely on the shoulders of the provincial and federal governments.

"Fifteen years of Supreme Court decisions have yet to be reflected in provincial and federal policies," he said.

"Our treaty partners continue to disregard direction from the Supreme Court in dealing with our people."

James Trusler, President of Platinex, said he agrees that the government has only compounded the problem.

"If you want to look at the Supreme Court decisions that were made...the government has a requirement to consult with First Nations. There is no requirement with companies to consult," said Trusler from his office in Aurora, Ontario. "They're telling us to go and do the consultation. Well we can't negotiate because we have nothing to negotiate...we have no authority to change legislation. The government of Ontario has been sitting on their hands for years. They're afraid to take the initiative because when you take initiative, you expose yourself."

Trusler said certain members of Big Trout Lake have used the situation to

their own advantage.

"This whole issue was triggered because we now have a backer who's willing to put several million bucks in to evaluate it. Once we did that, then the stalling came into play," he said. "I think they saw it as a political opportunity. We want to work with First Nations but I think at this stage they're trying to use us as a pawn to attract attention from the government."

Trusler said the deposit could turn out to be one of the largest platinum deposits in North America. If agreements between First Nations and mineral developers can be reached, Trusler said the benefits could be far-reaching.

"There is opportunity for them now. For every job directly in the mine, there will be seven outside the mine," he said. "We see ourselves as a positive force and it's frustrating to be obstructed like this."

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