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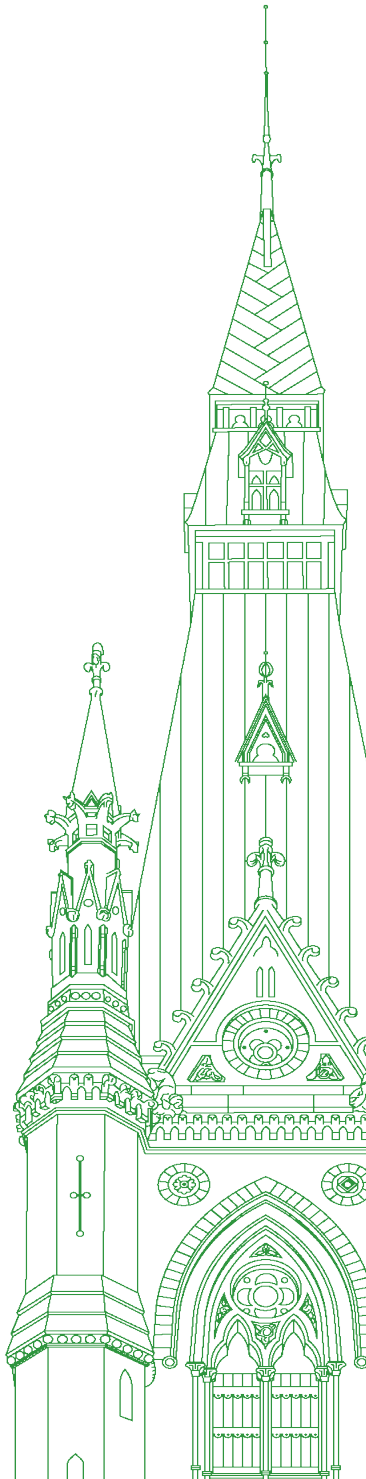

Chair: Mrs. Jenica Atwin

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Wednesday, May 31, 2023

● (1635)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to the 68th meeting of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

Today's meeting is being held in hybrid form, pursuant to the House order adopted on Thursday, June 23, 2022. Committee members can participate in person or via the Zoom application. The proceedings will be published on the House of Commons website. For your information, the webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entire committee.

[*English*]

For those participating virtually, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting in French, English and Inuktitut. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French. Please select your language now. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately and we will ensure that interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your mike will be controlled as usual by the proceedings and verification officer.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to remind you that you must address the chair.

[*English*]

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on November 21, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of land restitution for first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

Today, on our first panel, we welcome Sean Willy, president and CEO of Des Nedhe Group; Harold Calla, executive chair of the First Nations Financial Management Board; and Sakom Allan Polchies of St. Mary’s First Nation.

Thank you so much for joining us this afternoon. You will each have five minutes for your introductory comments, and we'll begin with Mr. Willy.

Mr. Sean Willy (President and Chief Executive Officer, Des Nedhe Group): Good afternoon. It is my great pleasure to be here this afternoon with you to provide my words around how Canada can support innovative and sustainable solutions to provide restitution of land to first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples across Canada.

First, let me recognize that today I am speaking on the unceded traditional lands of the Algonquin people.

Let me introduce myself and provide some context for why I'm here today.

My name is Sean Willy and I am both a Denesuline and a fifth-generation Canadian. I'm a member of the Deninu K'ue First Nation, which is located in the Northwest Territories. In my professional career, I am the president and CEO of the Des Nedhe Group, which is the English River First Nation's economic development corporation.

Of most importance to me is where I come from. I was born and raised throughout Canada's north. Born in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, I've lived in Fort McPherson, Rankin Inlet, Nunavut and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. I grew up in a family with a Métis-Dene mother and a mining executive father.

I'm proud to say that I started in the gold mines of the Northwest Territories as a local indigenous hire. Why did they hire me? Well, the resource companies were forced to hire local indigenous people as part of their permits, so I began a long and healthy career in the resource industry.

English River First Nation has also had a long working history in the resource industry with the uranium mining industry in northern Saskatchewan. As with any relationship, it has its ongoing partnerships' ups and downs, but what English River saw was opportunity. The community leaders saw that the world wanted and needed the world-class uranium deposits found on their traditional lands. They knew they could support this development and better their communities through the creation of businesses geared to work with uranium mining companies. Over the past 30 years, this has evolved into Des Nedhe Group, one of the most progressive tier one first nation-owned and driven entities in Canada.

Des Nedhe is composed of many distinctive business drivers. The heart of Des Nedhe is its industrial division, which was born out of our interactions with the northern Saskatchewan resource industry. This includes Des Nedhe's first company, Tron Construction and Mining; our civil earthmoving company, Neetah Construction; and our underground mine builder, Mudjatik Thyssen, which is one of the most innovative partnerships in the country.

We have strong retail and property divisions, which contain the busiest Petro-Canadas in the province of Saskatchewan, multiple other gas stations, convenience stores, grocery stores and one of Canada's few liquor stores located on first nation reserve lands, which is in Saskatoon. Des Nedhe also owns multiple investment opportunities, from steel fabrication companies to trucking partnerships and marketing and communications firms. However, one of the most exciting entities we own, govern and manage is English River's land development opportunities.

One question posed within this standing committee is this: How can we undertake a study on the restitution of land to first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples? Of special interest is how this could lead to economic development and growth opportunities across Canada.

I can't dive into solving the whole issue in five minutes, so I'm happy to answer any questions, but I will share with you English River and Des Nedhe's story of how they secured additional lands to help promote economic development.

English River's leadership was and still is very pragmatic when it comes to life and business. English River leadership took advantage of the outstanding leadership among Saskatchewan first nation groups when they all pushed for past wrongs when it comes to land entitlement. The creation of the treaty land entitlement process and programs in Saskatchewan in the late nineties fixed these past wrongs for communities such as English River. English River was provided the opportunity financially to purchase additional acres of allocated Crown and private lands to make up for misallocations of reserve lands when the treaty was signed.

English River did not sit idle. They secured thousands of acres in their traditional hunting, trapping and fishing lands in northern Saskatchewan. They then purchased additional lands south of the city of Saskatoon strictly for economic development purposes. Thus, the Grasswoods reserve was born. They were planning ahead to help them create future revenue centres that would accentuate their northern resource revenues. This was done in the late nineties.

Des Nedhe was tasked with developing the Grasswoods economic development lands. Saskatoon, over this 20-year period, has now grown adjacent to the Grasswoods reserve, but the city never planned on supporting the reserve lands, so no services have been provided over the last 20 years, such as infrastructure for sewage and waste-water piping. When we discussed this with the city in 2018, they advised that they would not be building infrastructure out our way for the next 40 years.

At Des Nedhe, we took matters into our own hands. We applied for funding from Indigenous Services Canada to build our own high-technology waste-water treatment facility and secured $2.3 million. We then approached, and negotiated and signed an agreement with, the Canada Infrastructure Bank to finance the development of that facility and others that were needed to finish the infrastructure off. Last, we partnered with the local rural municipality of Corman Park to agree to work together and allow them access to our infrastructure, thus supporting each other's growth and creating a long-term revenue driver for the first nation.

● (1640)

These partnerships highlight what can be done to unlock the potential of first nation lands when we create the right value proposition. In this example, everybody wins. The rural municipality wins with the higher tax assessment rates now that the lands are serviced by a first nation. Local developers win because they can sell smaller lots at higher value due to not needing to sell large land sizes for septic fields. The local landowners win, as their land values have gone up in price because of first nation involvement. The environment wins because we are moving away from lagoons or septic fields, which are predominant in Saskatchewan, to a state-of-the-art waste-water treatment facility.

English River, through proactive and pragmatic leadership, is securing additional lands and has set up a very strong example of how to reclaim your lands for the betterment of your first nation. They have created a truly leading-edge practice. They are the only first nation that owns urban lands ready for long-term urban development, and control some of the richest lands full of the high-grade uranium needed to power a clean-energy transition.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Willy.

We'll now proceed to Mr. Calla.

The floor is yours for five minutes.

Mr. Harold Calla (Executive Chair, First Nations Financial Management Board): Thank you.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today.

The restitution of land is a deeply important part of reconciliation. A strong connection to our land is part of the values that define who we are as indigenous people in Canada.

According to a study released two months ago by the Environics Institute, 81% of Canadians see inadequate indigenous control over their lands and resources—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Calla. I'm so sorry, but I have to interrupt you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill wishes to make a point of order.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm also sorry to interrupt Mr. Calla. The interpreter informs me that the sound quality is insufficient to interpret.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're going to briefly suspend while we check with interpretation.

● (1640)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1645)

The Chair: I'm sorry about that, Mr. Calla. We're going to try again.

Can you start from the top? We'll see if the sound quality is any better.

Mr. Harold Calla: Okay.

Thank you for having me here today.

The restitution of land is a deeply important part of reconciliation. A strong connection to our land is part of the values that define who we are as indigenous people in Canada.

According to a study released two months ago by the Environics Institute, 81% of Canadians see—

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Mr. Calla, but I have to interrupt you again. We don't have interpretation.

We will go to Sakom Polchies, and then we'll return to you, Mr. Calla. I'm sorry about that.

Go ahead, Mr. Polchies.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Excuse me, Madam Chair.

Were the sound tests successful earlier?

The Chair: Yes, Ms. Gill.

[*English*]

Chief Polchies, you have the floor for five minutes.

Chief Allan Polchies (St. Mary's First Nation): *'Qey. Ntoliwis nil* Chief Allan Polchies. *Nuceyaw nil* Sitansisk, St. Mary's First Nation, in Fredericton, New Brunswick. *Woliwon* for having me here today.

St. Mary's First Nation, Sitansisk, is a Wolastoqiyik community under the peace and friendship treaties. St. Mary's First Nation, Sitansisk, also currently operates under the Indian Act and the Addition of Lands to Reserves and Reserve Creation Act to acquire and add lands to our land base—

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Chief Polchies, but I have to interrupt you as well. We're having technical difficulties.

Just hold on if you can. I know that your time is valuable. We'll get back to you as soon as we can.

● (1645)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1650)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Thank you very much for bearing with me, everyone. We will resume the meeting.

Mr. Calla and Chief Polchies, we're going to try one more time. We're going to give Mr. Calla the floor for five minutes. We'll return to you, Sakom Polchies, after that.

Unfortunately, if the sound does not work this time around, we'll have to work to reschedule, if possible. We're going to take one more crack at it. The third time's the charm.

Mr. Calla, you have five minutes. The floor is yours.

Mr. Harold Calla: Thank you for having me here today.

The restitution of land is a deeply important part of reconciliation. A strong connection to our land is part of the values that define who we are as indigenous peoples in Canada.

According to a study released two months ago by the Environics Institute, 81% of Canadians see inadequate indigenous control over their lands and resources as a barrier to reconciliation. More and more Canadians are seeing the need for indigenous communities to have more jurisdiction over their traditional territories. It should be noted that Canada sees reconciliation as part of its action plan to implement UNDRIP.

However, we need to understand that the transfer of land alone will not bring improvements to our communities. Canada must be prepared to invest in resources and indigenous-led responses to managing our traditional territories. We will need to build support to build capacity in our communities and increase indigenous jurisdiction over our traditional territories.

The public service needs to facilitate, support and help with this transfer to indigenous communities. I often speak to FMB staff and ask them to have an image in their minds of a young girl growing up in a northern remote first nations reserve. How does what we do improve her life and help her to fulfill her dreams and goals, and the dreams and goals of her community?

I think that's part of a vision that we have to keep in mind as we consider these matters. You can't develop healthy, sustainable indigenous communities, in keeping with UNDRIP, unless you have land and jurisdiction over it. You need to be recognized as a government with the appropriate powers and fiscal capacity.

In the few minutes I have here, there are a few things I want the committee to consider.

First nations increasingly look to expand their communities to respond to growing populations and new economic opportunities. Irregular boundaries, such as the ones I experienced in Attawapiskat, are a situation when one home may be on the reserve but the same space on the other side is not. We are simply out of space in many of our communities to construct homes and meet the needs of those communities.

The need for a focus on expanding indigenous reserves to drive economic development is important, particularly in urban centres like Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Saskatchewan—

● (1655)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Madam Chair, I'm sorry, but I have to intervene once again.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Calla, I'm so sorry. There's a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I waited, but twice the interpreter pointed out that the sound was too poor to interpret. Out of concern for the people who help us understand, I preferred to tell you again.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Calla and Sakom Polchies, the clerk will be in touch to reschedule your appearances. I'm so sorry, again, for the inconvenience. Our interpreters are very important to us, and we need to make sure we have proper sound quality.

Perhaps we could arrange for you to come in person, if you prefer, but we'll follow up for sure on those details. Thank you very much.

At this time, committee members, we will proceed with Mr. Willy. For our first round of questions, we have Mr. Vidal.

You have six minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Willy, for being here.

Before we get into the crux of the conversation today, Mr. Willy, I want to begin by acknowledging the role that the first nation you work with, through the economic development arm, as you identified, Des Nedhe Group.... You own a grocery store right up at The Forks at Beauval. In the midst of all the fires in northern Saskatchewan, your grocery store was pretty significant in the role it played. Its food security contribution during the fires in the last several weeks was not only for the people who live there, but for fire crews, the SaskPower people and the people involved in the evacuation.

Could you take a minute, quickly, and speak to how important it is to have a local business like that present at the time of an emergency situation like we saw in northern Saskatchewan over the last few weeks and are still seeing?

Mr. Sean Willy: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Vidal, for the question.

That is located on first nation lands that we obtained through treaty land entitlement. Again, it goes to the community's viewpoint about creating economic development through land purchases. They created the largest grocery store at a very important juncture in northern Saskatchewan. The highway leads up to Clearwater, La Loche, Buffalo Narrows, Buffalo River first nation and Canoe Lake.

We learned through COVID that this store was very important. We had to keep it open during COVID to support the families in northern Saskatchewan. I think they are so well versed. When we called them at 12 that morning to keep the store open because there was a flood of people leaving Buffalo Narrows and Île-à-la-Crosse, they were very happy to help.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that.

Committee members, if you ever get a chance to visit northern Saskatchewan, you should go and see this incredible store. It's pretty cool.

I want to pursue your discussion around the Grasswoods Urban Reserve a bit, Mr. Willy. You talked about the contribution that English River First Nation is doing there, especially in the context of building the new waste-water treatment facility that will not only enable you to build upon the current infrastructure, but also benefit the neighbouring rural municipality of Corman Park, which you also talked about.

There was a media release that you were part of when this project was announced. I want to read a quote and then ask you a quick question. It says:

> Innovative business ventures like the one we're creating between Des Nedhe Group, English River First Nation and our partners have the power to not just drive revenue in the short term, but most importantly, support long-term self-determination for the community. At Grasswoods Urban Reserve, we're leading the way with progressive environmental technologies and creating a sustainable future where economic success and environmental stewardship go hand in hand.

In my opinion, Mr. Willy, this is just another great example of economic reconciliation. What gets lost sometimes when we talk about these things is the good-news stories about what that contributes to not only the people on the ground right in the area around this urban reserve, but the people back in the English River First Nation.

Can you explain the impact of the development you've done in the Grasswoods Urban Reserve, including the waste-water treatment facility and the development there, and what that means to the people of English River First Nation?

Mr. Sean Willy: I'm very happy to, Mr. Vidal.

They secured that land 20-plus years ago through treaty land entitlement. Because the city and, at the time, the RM were quite frightened that a first nation was buying land around Saskatoon, everyone was paralyzed and they didn't want to help the community. It had such potential. We've seen such great examples across the country, with Tsuut'ina in Calgary, Enoch in Edmonton, and Tseil-Waututh, Musqueam and Squamish in Vancouver. English River had a very strong asset there, but without any services it was never going to go anywhere.

When I came in, what we had to do was.... How could we unlock the value of this land's potential? The current government had a very strong policy towards supporting waste-water infrastructure on first nation reserves, so we were happy to access funding through that stream to get this going.

What we found out, though, was that with our sovereign rights on our lands, first nations could, by building this type of infrastructure, add value to other stakeholders within the region. Saskatoon is quite motivated to build on the lands they own in the north end of the city, and we're not interested in investing in infrastructure on the south side of Saskatoon. The RM of Corman Park was and the landowners of southern Saskatoon were, so you saw a first nation coming in and solving a problem for a region.

This will create own-source revenue for English River. It will create urban employment for urban members. Like many northern first nations, we're seeing a lot of migration to the urban centres for education, so this offers a chance to develop these lands and to put in gathering places for our Dene members in Saskatoon, which is primarily a Plains Cree community.

As to own-source revenue, I mentioned pragmatism. I think the government should understand that there's so much money within indigenous economic reconciliation right now that I could travel the country and go to conferences. However, what's it really doing to the grassroots? Our leadership is always very pragmatic: You need own-source revenue to control your self-determination. We've seen this in the Northwest Territories and we've seen this in northern Alberta, northern B.C. and northern Saskatchewan. This will just spur further own-source revenue so they can then journey on their own path to self-determination, unfettered by operational financing from Indigenous Services.

● (1700)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

Quickly, for the committee's sake, I want you to talk about the geography a bit. We talked about the English River First Nation. You talked about the store at Beauval. Now we're talking about the Grasswood Esso. Give them a sense of the distances and geography we're talking about here.

Mr. Sean Willy: Well, if I drive, it's only four and a half hours—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Sean Willy: —but it's about 650 kilometres. The traditional boundary goes up.... If you get a map of Saskatchewan out, the heart of northern Saskatchewan is Cree Lake. That's the most northern tip of English River's traditional hunting and trapping grounds, the most northern reserve. That's about 1,000 kilometres north.

The end of the road community is about 600 kilometres away from Saskatoon, and where they purchased the land was south of Saskatoon on your way to Regina on the busiest stretch of highway.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vidal.

We'll now move to Mr. Battiste for six minutes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Willy, for your comments.

For context, I went to high school in Saskatoon. My parents were out there for 30 years teaching at the University of Saskatchewan. I've come to know the area quite a bit over my lifetime. I've been really pleased to see how much economic growth has happened based on the urban reserves, casinos and things like them.

You said something very important. You said “land potential”. This whole study is premised on the idea that if there was a restitution of land to indigenous communities, they would have the potential to add to Canada's economic growth. Can you talk a bit about what you would see as the potential for more economic growth in your region and across Canada if there was a restitution of lands to indigenous people to help grow the economy?

Mr. Sean Willy: I come from a context where it's indigenous land regardless. We just have to act like it's our land, like we have from time immemorial.

Public policy-makers have such a challenge, because 90% of the population lives within 100 kilometres of the border. That population is aging. There's more pressure on those at this table and on your friends in the House to devote more money towards infrastructure and health care in the south.

What's going to drive the economy in the future is access to critical minerals in northern Canada. We need to start creating infrastructure driven by indigenous communities like we've done to unlock deposits of critical minerals. What we're doing now is asking resource companies to find super-deposits, because there's no infrastructure. The economics have to be in these massive super-deposits, which then have an inherently higher environmental risk. That's the vision. I think you can use the example we've set and the nation has set.

Our nation went out and looked at what lands we could first go to for hunting, trapping and fishing purposes. Those are the first lands we went after. As Mr. Calla said, that's the heart of indigenous peoples. It's the lands and where they grew up. Then they took the next step and said they need own-source revenue. We have this high-grade uranium in our backyard that is going to last for 100 years, but we need to now move and buy more lands to create economic development opportunities.

It needs to change from a rights and title discussion to strictly a business discussion. You look in some places, like our cousins in the United States, the Seminole Tribe.... They just bought the Mandalay Bay down in Las Vegas. They didn't do that because it's a rights and title discussion. They did it because it was a good business play.

Indigenous communities and indigenous business leaders like me are moving forward in that context. Land is at the core of how we can get to that and create value out of land.

● (1705)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Mr. Willy, there's often a misconception that indigenous communities are against development and economic growth. What I'm hearing from you is that more and more indigenous peoples in Canada are leading that growth in Canada and we shouldn't be scared of it.

Mr. Sean Willy: In certain pockets I think it has to be done correctly. You have to have proponents who are going to listen and look at three things from an environmental perspective. First is how our traditional knowledge is ingrained in the project design. Second is how we are included within the ongoing operations and monitoring of operations. Northern Saskatchewan has the first indigenous-led environmental monitoring program in the country. It's emulated in the Northwest Territories and Alberta. Third is how we'll be part of the reclamation and decommissioning of these projects.

If all of that is maintained, it's how we participate at the highest socio-economic levels. It's not just through tokenism and joint ventures, but real equity and revenue-sharing.

I do see a change in that happening, Mr. Battiste. I do think the north and the west have led that discussion.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you, Mr. Willy.

You spoke a bit about treaty land entitlements. For those of us who aren't from Saskatchewan, can you tell us what treaty land entitlements are and how the recognition of them has helped grow the communities?

Mr. Sean Willy: It's another great invention coming out of the first nations of Saskatchewan. It was driven with the premise that....

English River is an example. In the summer months, they'd go up to their hunting and trapping grounds in northern Saskatchewan. When the treaty commissioner came by, there was only one-quarter of the community in Patuanak along the Des Nedhe, the great river. They signed a treaty based on that number.

In Saskatchewan, the first nations pushed, saying that the numbers allocated during treaty signing were lower than what was actually reported. The Office of the Treaty Commissioner pushed for a number of first nations in Saskatchewan to get a bucket of money and a set of acreage. They could go out and resolve that past injustice. That's when communities like ours went out and secured their hunting, trapping and fishing right lands with Crown land. They then met with private landowners to secure some of the economic development lands.

I was listening to a story two elders were telling me last week. They had to come out here and convince former prime minister Chrétien to sign off on their economic development lands. They had a quota. They could only spend so much per acre. They said that was a bit paternalistic. He said, “Yes, let's get rid of that”, and they got their land.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: What I'm hearing is that, with the recognition of those treaty land entitlements and the money that was given, the first nations of Saskatchewan have been able to grow not only their economies but the economy of Saskatchewan as well.

Mr. Sean Willy: One hundred per cent.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Battiste.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Willy, for being with us today. I wish I could have taken you somewhere else. Obviously, we've been talking about all the benefits of economic development generated by land purchases in the west, for example, although this could manifest itself all over the territory—I dare to hope.

You spoke of reconciliation on the economic front, and I dare imagine that all types of reconciliation, so to speak, are interrelated. I don't want to make a typology of reconciliation, but reconciliation on the economic level is indeed another form of reconciliation.

Based on what you've seen, what you're seeing now, and even what you're planning, how does land restitution contribute to reconciliation, both economically, of course, and overall?

Thank you.

● (1710)

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Willy: I would fully support it. As I mentioned, I'm a believer that we need to act like we control and own the land already. There's a concept that we never gave it up. The act of providing land back would be a great step forward in reconciliation, of course, but I think we need to challenge our first nations to make sure they're creating their own economic development hubs with those opportunities.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: All right.

You talk about reconciliation on an economic level, but do you also see a connection between land restitution and the whole question of identity? I'm not saying that the economy isn't part of identity, far from it, but in what way do you link land restitution to the question of identity, to the question of survival and development other than economic development?

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Willy: Yes. Of course, there's an identity tied to it. You've seen with groups like James Bay Cree and the Tlicho in Northwest Territories and with Nunavut that pride of managing and being on your own lands, one hundred per cent. Examples like that go above and beyond just economic development. It's that tie to the land. It's that ability to actually call it your own.

We all know it's indigenous lands, but to officially say that and have control over every aspect of it is the ultimate form of reconciliation.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Without wanting to put words in your mouth, I'm also thinking about the issue of health, whether physical or mental, and culture. I'm not just talking about oral tradition, writing or dance, but culture in the broadest sense, which includes language, of course.

What do you see in the various practices? You mentioned the purchase of land, for example, in south Saskatoon, if I'm not mistaken, so far from the lands of the traditional territory. How do you view this acquisition? Do you also see any positive effects?

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Willy: Yes. We see positive impacts. It's a holistic viewpoint. To have a healthy culture, to have healthy health and to have happiness within your communities you need a strong socio-economic base. You need a diversified economy. You need the same options that people in urban centres have for education. You need the same quality of health care that you have in urban areas.

That's all very holistic. You still need a strong economy base. Our people are very pragmatic about it. We need to make money. It costs money to take a skidoo on the barren lands to go hunt caribou. Gas is upwards of two dollars a litre. What you see is that a lot of the people who work in the resource industry seem to keep their culture. The one thing that replaces our culture as indigenous people is poverty. That's the biggest threat to us.

It's engaging with resource developers or other players who can provide that economic support so that you can engage fulsomely in culture, in health and in happiness, if you will.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Do I have any speaking time left, Madam Chair?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half left.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: That's fine, thank you.

Mr. Willy, when landowners manage to develop resources and add economic vigour to certain groups, how can that support all the other important aspects related to reconciliation, such as those I named earlier? In particular, we talked about health, and you mentioned the holistic perspective.

I know you have more than 20 years' experience, particularly in the field of commerce. Do you have any examples to share with us?

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Willy: There are a couple of examples. On comprehensive land claim agreements, where the resource is located on first nations or Inuit on Inuit-owned lands, it creates dividends and payments into large trust funds that then support the social well-being of the community. In our instance, we don't technically own the land. There are still issues with obtaining reserve lands. You know, we're not allowed to leverage those lands.

We try to create value propositions that add value to the region around us to create own-source revenue. Once you have that own-source revenue, then you're less dependent on the federal government. All first nations I know want to be less dependent on the government. By creating OSR, you can say that you don't need this federal financing.

We are allowed then to invest in our own infrastructure as we see fit, which creates more employment. We are allowed to invest in our own health care services and holistic health care services, which we've seen. You have the all nations' health centre in Fort Qu'Appelle in Saskatchewan.

It's all about creating that economic foundation through the lands you own, where there could be resource development, some other type of revenue generation or, in our case, going commercial and creating lands for commercial and industrial use.

● (1715)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gill.

[*English*]

Ms. Idlout, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᖃᓄᖅᓭᓐᓂᒃ ᐃᒃᓯᕐᐅᑕᓪᓗ ᐊ ᐊᑕᐅᓯᕎᒃ ᐊᐱᓚᓂᐊᖏᖅᑭᑦ ᑭᐅᔨᓂᒃᑯᓘᓐᓄᑦ ᖃᐅᔨᒪᑎᑦᓯᐊᒪᔪᓐᓇᖅᓯᖏᓐᓄᑦ ᐊ ᑐᓂᓂ– ᐊᖏᖅᑯ ᐊ ᒪᓕᒫᓂᐅᖏᖅᑎᑦᓯᐊᖓᔪᖅᑕᐅᓪᓚᑦ. ᐊᒻ ᑲᓇᑕᒃ ᒪᓇᐅᐅᓴᖅ ᐊᑐᑦᑕ ᐊ ᐃᓕᒪᖅᓯᑎᖅᖅ– ᑐᓂᒃ ᐱᓴᓇᐅᑎᑦᖅᑎᑕᐅᓴᑦᑐᓂᒃ ᑦᑲᑯᐊ ᐊ ᑦᓇᓐᓇ ᖃᑲᓂᕿ ᐃᓕᒋᐊᐃᐅᒃ ᐊᖖᑎᖅᑕᐅᒪᒪᓰᖅᐱᑦ ᑦᓇᓐᓇ ᐊᒻ ᓄᑦᑎᑕᒫᓂᒪᓕ– ᒪᖖᓰᖅ ᐊ ᓄᓇᒋᑦᑎᓐᓂᒃ ᓄᓇᖅᖅᑲᖅᓯᒪᔪᖅᑎᒍᑦ ᑦᓇᓐᓇ ᐊ ᐃᓕᒪᖅᓯᑎᖅᖅᓂᐅᑎᒃ ᐱᐊᓴᓇᐅᑎᑑᑕᐅᓴᑦᑐᓂᒃ ᐊᓯᔪᐃᓚᐊ– ᖃᖅᓴᕐ. ᐊᓯᔪᐅᓚᐊᖏᖅᓴᖅᑲᓂᖅ ᑦᓇᓐᓇ ᐊ ᐃᓕᒪᖅᓯᑎᖅᖅᓂᓕᖅ...ᖃᖅᓯᓄᒃ ᐱᐊᓴᓇᐅᑎᑑᑦᑐᓂᒃ.

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have one question I would like to ask you.

I want to advise everyone I'll be handing this over to my colleague, Mike Morrice.

Right now in Canada, there's a free entry system in effect. What do you think about the free entry system, where those who stake claims on land have the free will to do whatever they want with the land? Do you see that as detrimental to the environment or beneficial? How do you view it?

Should the free entry system be changed or amended so those who stake claims have some restrictions?

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Willy: Thank you for the question.

Des Nedhe oversees all the land and environment for the community. I have a wonderful band member who runs a process, so we look at it differently. Again, we're in a provincial jurisdiction that's very strong at promoting mining and mineral resources.

We look at all the court cases that have been put in front of us, and we take a very strong approach to being the ones who get out early and define what the processes are for doing exploration on English River traditional lands. We'll sign exploration agreements. If companies don't, then we'll use our leverage, either through public relations or the regulatory process, to make sure those are identified and the bad players and the bad apples are culled out.

What you really don't want to do when you're looking for uranium.... They have a steep hill to climb on the regulatory process as it is and with public perception. English River has long been supportive of that industry—80% of the community supports that industry—so we tried to flip it so resource companies know they want to get our support early and often. We've created a process that's very clear.

Again, we're trying to act like a nation without having a comprehensive land claim agreement.

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Idlout, as well.

I'd like to follow up on questions with respect to current federal government land, Crown land—specifically, Mr. Willy, if you have more to say about your advice for parliamentarians who are interested in partnerships with indigenous communities that have made clear their interest in land back and in their leadership to move towards restitution of that land. What advice would you have for parliamentarians who want to be a part of centring their leadership in that process?

● (1720)

Mr. Sean Willy: I'd support it, one hundred per cent. I would host the first meeting. Let's get going on that. The hard part is going to be the overlap agreements, because how are you going to determine who has used that land and what time period? That's where the process gets sticky. I think everyone's for it. It's just this: Who's traditional? Who was there last? Who used it the most? Especially on Crown land, I think it's a great step to go forward. I'd be well behind it.

Mr. Mike Morrice: In terms of a follow-up, is there any experience you'd want to share with the committee, Mr. Willy, from your lived experience, where you've seen progress made that parliamentarians here could be learning from?

Mr. Sean Willy: I think it has to be driven by indigenous communities. That's where I think the issue always falls with the federal government, because there are more hurdles and barricades put up and more challenges. If we really want to.... There's a good push now to clear the docket of all comprehensive land claims and specific claims, which is well-received across first nation country. However, what I've seen is that, when first nations drive these discussions and come up with our own solutions and our own partnerships, it clears the way for the federal government to come in after. It's our own processes and procedures. It's holistic. It's using our own knowledge keepers and elders, all accentuated within the federal process. The federal process is not the conduit.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrice and Ms. Idlout.

Before we move on to our second round, Mr. Willy, are you okay to stay for another 15 minutes of questions? I know you have a hard stop.

Mr. Sean Willy: Sure, that's okay.

The Chair: Okay.

We will do a condensed second round, and we will begin with Mr. Schmale for five minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witness here today. It's a lovely conversation we are having. Gary Vidal speaks very highly of you. I was very interested to hear a lot of the stories he's been telling about you. They're all good, though. I want you to know that, and I think it's important to know that.

Since we weren't able to hear entirely from Harold Calla, I want to ask if you know about his RoadMap project? You do. That's basically what you're talking about today: more grassroots-up and less top-down, and less endless program funding that never seems to actually improve life on reserve.

Gary was also telling me about some of the businesses that operate in your community. He thought what a great opportunity it is to talk more about that and tell anybody listening or watching what amazing opportunities are happening in your community.

If you want to, you could tell us about it. Gary was bragging, but I think everyone should hear this, not just he and I.

Mr. Sean Willy: I appreciate that.

I don't think we're alone. We call it economic reconciliation, but the communities in northern Saskatchewan pushed for inclusion in the opening of these uranium mines in the late 1970s. When I was growing up in the Northwest Territories and got the opportunity to work on starting the second diamond mine, we came down to northern Saskatchewan and brought our leaders down to those communities.

Then you look at the diamond mines and see what they've done in Mr. McLeod's riding—it's the same thing. Northern Alberta started doing it a little later in the process, but, again, you saw the jobs it created, the employment. These are all Denesuline communities that are tied to these resources. It's that very pragmatic viewpoint, and it's that generational "look ahead" of getting educated, getting a job and creating economic wealth in your community, which helps, then, your kids in getting better educated.

I'm a beneficiary of a mother who went to high school, who went to university and who was a first nation woman who was the first indigenous person in the Bank of Montreal banking program. I saw what she was doing, and I wanted to do better. Every first nation, Métis and Inuit person sees their parent going to work, and we all want to strive to do better.

It all starts with being given that opportunity. We have to take the next steps now. The table has been set. Our elders set the table. They fought for us to get a piece of the pie. Now we have to continue with that dialogue. I think that's what sets our region apart.

As I mentioned, we have many different aspects within our company that service multiple different clients across the country. Again, our community's viewpoint is to create as much wealth as we can, so our community can set the path for their own journey on self-determination and create as many jobs for indigenous people as possible, and so we transfer from a welfare system to a wage-based economy. The multiplier effect will be our kids going to work and going into education.

Secondly, what we're seeing with those companies is that they're opening up opportunities. Corporate Canada now wants to do something. For years it was on the corner of their desks, but what I've seen is a massive change since the unmarked graves in Kamloops: We need to do action.

Many companies are getting involved in indigenous reconciliation planning. We have a company that helps corporate Canada do that. Ontario Power Generation came out with a strong reconciliation action plan. Telus and Enbridge came out with strong reconciliation action plans, all with the focus of doing more action than just rhetoric. That's what we really need. We want to be a tier-one Canadian company that happens to be indigenous. We don't want to leave it to just politics and rhetoric to get the first contract. We want to have customer service and quality so we get the second, third and fourth. The biggest component of that right now is developing that land in Saskatoon to create a billion-dollar revenue driver for the next 50 years.

● (1725)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Do I have time for one more?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay.

For the own-source revenue you were talking about, can you give us some examples of where some of that money was being turned into the community and creating opportunity?

Mr. Sean Willy: It goes to support services —education services, elder services. Our community put in an artificial ice rink, because they're crazy about hockey. We built a bridge across the Churchill River. We've supported operations—garbage cleanups, snow clearing—just to create more employment in the community, but not the per diem payments. We don't do per diem payments to individual band members.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Schmale.

We'll move to Mr. Powlowski for five minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Mr. Willy, do I have this right? English River, in their land settlement agreement, received both land and money.

Mr. Sean Willy: Yes. They received money to buy the land, the number of acres they could flip into reserve lands.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: The money was supposed to be used purely to buy land. Is that the way it worked?

Mr. Sean Willy: Yes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Okay, so that's what I'm going to get to.

The reason, as I understand it, was that under the treaty each person was to get so much land, so many acres, but they got ripped off. In fact, two-thirds of their people weren't there and weren't counted, so they were owed more land.

Mr. Sean Willy: That's right.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Now something similar happened in my riding, with Lac La Croix. They just finished their land settlement agreement. As far as I understand it—and maybe I should be asking my neighbour down here this question rather than you—they were just purely given money and not money to buy land.

Have things changed? That was back, I think he said, in the nineties. I have some other land settlement agreements coming up in my riding. I think it's just money, rather than land. Has that changed? Should it be an option that, rather than getting money, you get land instead? How did it work with English River? You had money, but it had to go to buying land.

Mr. Sean Willy: That was the process called treaty land entitlement; it's the TLE process. It doesn't include all 74 first nations in Saskatchewan. I don't even know if it was half, but it was a dollar amount tied to then going out and securing this number of acres for your community.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: When they secured those acres, and you bought a bunch of land.... I'm going to get to what you mean by "buying the land". You got a bunch of land south of Saskatoon, but my understanding is that, if it's reserve land under the Indian Act, the people of the reserve don't actually own the land. The government holds it in trust. Now that land south of Saskatoon, is that reserve land under the Indian Act so it's held in trust?

Mr. Sean Willy: Yes, and that's a decision we make. There are many first nations that go out and buy land and leave it as fee simple land. It's a lot more flexible as a business here to leverage it, but the land we have south of Saskatoon is reserve land. That also affords us different regulatory processes like building a waste-water treatment facility. Nobody else could build a waste-water treatment facility in six months.

● (1730)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Because you have some assistance from indigenous—

Mr. Sean Willy: It's sovereign. I'm building this waste-water treatment facility. Who's going to come and stop me? I'm going to use it for my first nation to provide a service.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: English River First Nation has also purchased land in the fee simple as well.

Mr. Sean Willy: In fee simple, yes, and other communities have, and they've left it as fee simple land.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: If you were to do it all over again when it came to purchasing the land, fee simple versus having it as reserve land, which of the two arrangements do you find is of more economic benefit?

Mr. Sean Willy: Right now I like the reserve land status. I employ a lot of indigenous people on reserve land status, and they really like working on reserve land status. Second, the regulatory regime on first nation lands is not as rigorous as off-reserve lands, so it offers me unique advantages.

By telling you that, you cannot change anything.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I guess this is the last question. If the first nation owns the fee simple, is that the first nation and do all members...? Who owns it?

Mr. Sean Willy: You set up an economic development corporation. I'm owned by the first nation, but it's an economic development corporation that would go out and purchase the land or a limited partnership model would go out and own the land.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Powlowski.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Willy, in what way can land restitution be part of reconciliation, which incidentally involves several stakeholders? What are the benefits, in your opinion, for first nations, Inuit and Métis, but also for the population as a whole? How can this be combined?

Honestly, I have to say that there's sometimes a stereotype that the economic aspect is completely excluded when there are discussions about or with first nations, even though it's part of the intent. I'd like you to explain how many people could benefit from this reconciliation, which, of course, includes land restitution.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Willy: I think there have been numerous studies done on the GDP creation of full inclusion of indigenous people in the economy. Look at—I'll use the James Bay Cree example—their self-comprehensive land claim and the amount of economic development that it has spurred, not only for the James Bay Cree but for the province of Quebec. Look at the number of people...the offices that have been created by the James Bay Cree. They have an office here in Ottawa.

It benefits all Canadians when indigenous people are successful. It's only going to increase as Canadians want access to critical minerals, which are found predominantly in northern Canada. The world wants our resources. If we have high indigenous participation, strong ESG metrics and fair taxation, then it's only going to help everybody within this country. Again, we're putting massive numbers of dollars in infrastructure and health care in southern Canada and nothing in northern Canada because there are only a few members of Parliament from those regions.

I just think that land restitution, allowing first nations to drive those processes to unlock forestry, mineral development, power generation and power transmission, will only benefit all Canadians. When English River was in its heyday, it was asking for payments back from Indigenous Services Canada, because it had lowered the welfare by 90% in the community. One of the biggest drivers we never talk about in economic development is moving the negative draw on welfare and social assistance over to a wage-based economy.

Community members of English River are going down to Meadow Lake and then purchasing trucks. There have been studies done by the University of Saskatchewan that show that every two jobs that are created from indigenous employment create another job in the service industry because, it's sad to say, we don't save our money. We go out and buy trucks and furniture and computers. There is example after example and report after report from the banks about the GDP creation of full inclusion of indigenous people in the economy, and that starts with land back.

● (1735)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Gill.

Mr. Morrice, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mike Morrice: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Yellowhead Institute's red paper on land back makes the connection between colonialism and the loss of biodiversity. I want to just read from the red paper briefly:

> ...the matter of land back is not merely a matter of justice, rights or "reconciliation"...Indigenous jurisdiction can indeed help mitigate the loss of biodiversity and climate crisis.

Mr. Willy, you have spoken a lot today about the economic impacts of land back. Can you also share your perspective, at a time of global biodiversity loss, of the benefit to all Canadians when it comes to the biodiversity implications of land back?

Mr. Sean Willy: I think that giving the power and control of land back, you'll see a more holistic viewpoint. As I mentioned, the best environmental monitoring programs, the ones that are emulated throughout the country.... I was, in fact, lucky enough to share these with indigenous people in Australia and with the Sami in Sweden and Norway. We drove the environmental policies for northern Saskatchewan, northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories.

We just want a seat at the table, so it's not all about economic development. We have focused a lot on that, but you're right. It's about then having the same seat at the table for fish monitoring programs or flora and fauna programs up in the Northwest Territories around the diamond mines. It is a balance, and yes, I think.... My cousins up in Łutsel K'e, Northwest Territories, are leaders in the protected area of the Thaidene Nene National Park. We are part of the land guardians program, getting out there with the exploration companies early on.

Yes, I think it's going to help biodiversity, but it's not going to be these extremes. You're not going to shut down all development in all regions. You're going to have this balance, or you're not going to have resources for everyone. You're going to have this balance in between.

The Chair: Thank you so much. That ends our second round of questions.

Mr. Willy, you've been a trooper for us today. You've really guided our discussions and given such excellent testimony. Thank you so much for your time today.

We will briefly suspend and move in camera for the second portion of our meeting.

Thank you very much.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]