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THE FORD GOVERNMENT

CLIMATE CRIME #9 UPDATE JAN 2023

The Ring of Fire: Suffocating Indigenous “Breathing Lands”

The Crime

Despite grave environmental and climate change consequences, the Ford government is committed to ramping up mining development deep within traditional Indigenous territory. It has no interest in obtaining free, prior and informed consent. The mining industry has dubbed an area some 750 km northwest of Thunder Bay as the “Ring of Fire.” First Nations know it as the “Breathing Lands.”

Different names reflect starkly different views of Settler and Indigenous cultures toward Turtle Island. Are wild spaces endless storehouses of raw materials ripe for extraction and profit? Or are the vast peatlands a living, breathing complex of interconnected life from which humans should only harvest what can be sustainably shared?

The Ford government’s answer is clear. It intends to ram access roads into the Ring of Fire area, expressing frustration with Indigenous resistance and federal and provincial environmental impact assessments. During the 2018 provincial election, Ford threatened to drive a bulldozer himself if the “red tape” weren’t cut.

His newly elected government proceeded to tear up a 2014 agreement with the affected First

Nations. It had been intended to establish conditions under which Indigenous people would collectively consent to development. Instead, the government has been seeking agreements with individual First Nations desperate to end deep cycles of poverty. Financial relief would hinge on active sponsorship of access roads and mineral development. This is classic divide and conquer, as other First Nations oppose development without detailed prior scrutiny.

To accelerate expanded resource extraction, one of Ford’s bulldozer omnibus bills (Bill 43, or *Build Ontario*) “streamlines” planning and opens for development over 225,000 square km of previously protected northern land.

Blasting access roads into the Breathing Lands to boost resource extraction risks further climate breakdown. That’s because Ontario’s northern peat lands contain one of the world’s largest remaining intact storehouses of fossil carbon. Canada is home to over a quarter of the world’s carbon-sequestering peat land, much of which is concentrated in Ontario’s Hudson’s Bay Lowlands.

Resource development would make peat land permafrost more susceptible to thawing, releasing carbon dioxide. Ontario’s permafrost areas are in part currently protected by the snow packing



activity of one of Canada's largest remaining caribou herds. The herd, in turn, is at serious risk should access roads disrupt its feeding grounds and migration routes.

Keeping the carbon in the ground is crucial to containing global warming and meeting Ontario's carbon reduction targets, not to mention Canadian and global targets. The Ford government's aggressive enabling of Ring of Fire mega-development regardless of the climate risk involved exposes its reckless disregard climate breakdown. Not to mention any meaningful effort to address it.

Towards a People and Climate First Alternative

In 2021, some First Nations living in and downstream from the Ring of Fire called for an immediate moratorium on any further exploration and other mineral development activity on their lands pending completion of federal and provincial environmental assessments of two proposed access roads. Ontario rejected this out of hand.

A moratorium, in any event, is only a stop-gap measure. A permanent solution must be found.

Canada has ratified the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP). Its central principle

is that development on Indigenous Territory should only proceed with the full, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of Indigenous people within the affected lands. FPIC goes well beyond the mere "consultation" requirements of conventional environmental assessment processes. The federal legislation, however, cannot and does not amend Ontario's legislation governing the approval of resource projects on Indigenous territory.

A Climate and People First Climate Plan for Ontario must start from recognition of Indigenous sovereignty over traditional territory. Developments like the Ring of Fire should only proceed with the full agreement of all affected Indigenous Peoples under conditions free from the economic and social coercion imposed by the colonial occupation and exploitation of traditional territories.

"Critical Mineral Strategies"

In 2022 the Federal and Ontario governments released "Critical Mineral Strategies" designed to accelerate the extraction of minerals central to the





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renewable energy transition. Both governments are actively searching for ways to “streamline” environmental assessment and regulatory approval requirements at each stage of the exploration-to-production cycle.

The Federal government outlined the top three goals of the Strategy:

1. Support economic growth, competitiveness and job creation
2. Promote climate action and environmental protection
3. Advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples

Regarding goal number one, Natural Resources Minister Jonathan Wilkinson described the Critical Minerals Strategy: “Critical minerals present a generational opportunity for Canada in many areas: exploration, extraction, processing, downstream product manufacturing and recycling.... Critical minerals are the building blocks for the green and digital economy. There is no energy transition without critical minerals: no batteries, no electric cars, no wind turbines and no solar panels.”

It is unclear how goals two and three can be reconciled with the Strategy’s promises to streamline environmental assessment and other regulatory approval processes. When major projects require both federal and provincial impact or environmental assessments, the strategy document makes it clear that Ottawa “is committed to meeting the objective of ‘one project, one assessment’.”

Wilkinson was blunt: “It cannot take us 12 to 15 years to open a mine in this country. Not if we want to achieve our

climate goals.”

Strategy “sets off a lot of alarm bells”

Jamie Kneen, a spokesperson for Mining Watch Canada, an environmental and human rights watchdog group, said the new Strategy watered down an already weak regulatory regime and “sets off a lot of alarm bells.” He added that Ottawa’s new federal “does not do enough to confront the multiple crises Canada—and all humankind—is up against: climate, biodiversity, water, pollution, inequality, migration, (while promising) to accelerate the literal bulldozing of Indigenous rights.”

The impact of the new Federal and Provincial Critical Mineral Strategies on the Ring of Fire development is not clear due to three on-going environmental assessments. On the one hand, we have Canadian and Ontario Natural Resource Ministers initiating expedited mining project approvals. At the same time, in late 2022 Mr. Wilkinson expressed doubts. “People ‘often get stuck’ on the Ring of Fire because of its massive potential. However, from environmental assessments to the proposal of a mining project there’s still a long way to go before mining can actually begin in the region.”

Indigenous Communities Remain Divided

At the same time, two Indigenous Nations signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Australian-based Wyloo Metal, the owner of the proposed Eagle’s Nest Mine in the Ring of Fire. The Ontario government



had previously approved increased exploration activity within the Ring of Fire area over the objections of the Attawapiskat First Nation.

Other Indigenous Communities within watersheds downstream from the Ring of Fire and proposed Eagle's Nest mine, continue to press for a moratorium on any development in the region.

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