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Cree sue Alberta, Ottawa over oil and gas projects

Karen Kleiss, Canwest News Service

Published: Wednesday, May 14, 2008

EDMONTON -- A northern Alberta aboriginal band has launched a civil lawsuit claiming unbridled oil and gas development in their traditional territory renders their treaty rights meaningless.

The three-inch thick statement of claim filed this morning by the Beaver Lake Cree Nation lists each of the more than 15,000 developments approved in their traditional lands near Lac La Biche.

According to the statement of claim, the approval of the leases and projects forces the band out of traditional areas and degrades the environment, leading to a decline in wildlife that in turn compromises the band's freedom to hunt, fish and trap -- rights they are guaranteed under Treaty 6.

"The scale and scope and speed of industrial development makes those treaty rights meaningless," veteran aboriginal land claims lawyer Jack Woodward said outside court, calling the infringement "overwhelming."

"There is no constraint on industrial development in Alberta, except that imposed by the courts."

Mr. Woodward, who filed the claim on behalf of Beaver Lake Chief Alphonse Lameman, said the claim is historic because it is the first time in Canadian history that a band has sought to identify each and every one of the infringements on its traditional territory.

The lawsuit names as defendants the governments of Canada and Alberta.

The contents of a statement of claim have not been proven in court. No statement of defence has been filed.

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