

NEWS RELEASE

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Clear Sky Connections negotiates new funding amidst blatant disregard of sovereignty and inclusion in decision-making regarding First Nations territories

CYBERSPACE (MANITOBA) – Clear Sky Connections (CSC) is disappointed to be informed that \$55M that had been previously allocated for Northern Manitoba has been officially withdrawn by the Government of Canada, at the same time that the Province makes unilateral decisions regarding fibre optics in First Nations territory otherwise known as “Manitoba”.

In anticipation of federal funding being withdrawn from the Wekitowak project, Clear Sky Connections had been meeting with various federal departments to continue to advance the 100% owned and operated indigenous high-speed fibre optic network. “What is it not yet clear to each level of government that you cannot proceed into First Nations territory without our consent? We continuously stress that we want to partner with entities that understand that First Nation ownership of the network is imperative. Internet Service Providers, Investors, Government Departments, or anyone else that feels they can supersede First Nations in decisions regarding their territories must take a step back and realize times have changed. We will no longer accept solutions for us without us at the table. We call on Minister Monsef and the pertinent provincial Ministers to address the situation immediately” said Chief David Crate, Chairperson of Clear Sky Connections.

Clear Sky Connections has put together a comprehensive plan and has had the endorsement of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs since the inception of the former Technology Council in 2009. Clear Sky Connections has the support of the 40 member Nations in Manitoba and will continue the build projects as funding is received.

Without access to broadband, unconnected communities are at a disadvantage and the digital divide continues to grow wider. The proposed project would deliver a broad range of tangible benefits to the First Nation communities in Manitoba. Web-based services are a necessity for access to government information, education, health care, and small-business development. In these areas without reliable internet, the public cannot participate in government, students struggle to complete homework, small businesses are unable to reach their customers, and parents are not able to access healthcare technologies like telemedicine for their families.

“The pandemic has shown us how important it is that everyone in Manitoba have access to high-speed internet for everything from remote learning to virtual health visits and economic development. These decisions are much too important to be made behind closed doors by the federal and provincial governments and without the input of self-determining Indigenous communities” said Wab Kinew, Leader of the Manitoba NDP Caucus.

Clear Sky Connections has proposed a phased-in build to the Government of Canada that can connect the member First Nations communities at a cost of \$152M. The planned Fibre Optic Network consists of a

total of 8,789 kilometers of fibre (including 5,170 kilometers of existing fibre and 3,619 kilometers of new build fibre). Clear Sky Connections has shown that it has the support of the member Nations and that fibre networks need to be owned and operated by First Nations as Indigenous communities have been waiting for too long. The members clearly stated at the AGM on August 27th, 2020, that unity continues under this umbrella and the divide and conquer tactic will persevere no more.

The Clear Sky Indigenous Network is well positioned to build and operate the proposed fibre network as Indigenous Services Canada provided funding for a fibre optic project that was used for the initial site of Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation that is on target to be “lit up” by mid-October 2020. The other 2 communities will be near completion by early Summer 2021. The partnership is a mix of two 100% owned First Nation organizations that have the expertise to bring the network to fruition. Indigenous Services Canada has always been a strong supporter of Manitoba’s First Nations in the development of, and carrying out of, this bold initiative to reap economic benefits at the community level.

Reconciliation means supporting Indigenous-led proposals and with the member Nations supporting Clear Sky Connections, we anticipate that the Government of Canada will continue to provide funding for the 100% owned and operated telecommunications company for Manitoba First Nations. The province of Manitoba should follow suit and recognize that the true stewards of any network or infrastructure being built that crosses our territory should be first endorsed by us as the First Peoples.

Chief Cornell McLean, lead for the For-Profit arms of Clear Sky said: “Why isn’t anybody asking what really happened here? Why are the First Nation communities always pointed at at the end of the day as the reason for an Agreement not working out that was imposed by the government? We have always said we are moving forward in a positive way and it is hard to do that when we are continuously disregarded when we want to reach true reconciliation. It is 2020 and we are in the middle of a global pandemic. It is hardly the time to make such a huge decision that is going to impact our generations to come!”

“Given everything that has happened this year – from those working remotely, to school closures and home schooling, to all who have had to go into isolation – this decision could not have come at a worse time. In a world more connected than ever, our communities are left behind through a lack of meaningful consultation” said Grand Chief Jerry Daniels of the Southern Chiefs’ Organization.

-30-

Clear Sky Connections, mandated by the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, originated from the word “MIZHAKWUN” a name received in ceremony that translates to “the Sky is Clear” where the eagle opened up the sky and cleared the path for the future generations to connect. This entity is part of a corporate group, a reform of the Manitoba First Nations Technology Council whom the Chiefs of Manitoba gave the direction to Build the Manitoba First Nations Network of the Future and the consent to continue to secure investments and funding to bring high-speed internet to Manitoba First Nations and to work with surrounding communities.

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