

Frustrated chief seeks answers from Ottawa on fishery funds

By MARY ELLEN MacINTYRE Truro Bureau

INDIAN BROOK — The pile of papers on one side of Chief Alex McDonald's desk bears an address label for Auditor General Sheila Fraser. On the other side lie documents destined for the federal access to information commissioner.

One pile represents a cry for help, the other a simple request for information. Both sides speak volumes about an unfortunate saga in this First Nation community and how it has polarized residents on the verge of a band council election.

Chief Alex McDonald said Wednesday he'll just be glad to get an answer from either government agency.

"How else will the people of Indian Brook find out how this money is being spent or how much money individual councillors have made on this cosy deal?" he asked.

"This is not just about the people of Indian Brook. This is about all the people who live in this country called Canada. Taxpayers have a right to know how this money is being spent," Mr. McDonald said.

"Certainly, the people who are trying to feed a family on 200 lousy dollars every two weeks in this community should be able to find out how come we can't have access to information on what's being done with \$5 million on our behalf."

Mr. McDonald is referring to information on a fishery company called Indian Brook Fishery Ltd., set up by a quorum of eight councillors from the band.

After receiving about \$5 million for training, equipment, salaries and office space — as well as about \$20 million in licences from the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans — the group of councillors started the company last year.

That just about sums up the information made available by members of the group.

As far as officials at Fisheries and Oceans are concerned, the chief and the councillors who do not belong to the fishing company did not sign the arrangement, so they are not entitled to see any information.

Meanwhile, Kathy Stewart, director of aboriginal fisheries in the Maritimes for Fisheries and Oceans, said the arrangement was only signed with the eight members of the quorum.

"Chief McDonald and two of his supporters on council were not part of that quorum," she said Wednesday.

"The agreement is between DFO and the quorum of council. But we have always felt that it is incumbent upon the quorum to be transparent with their community. It is communal, for the good of the community," she said.

She insists the hands of DFO officials are tied on the issue.

"All we can do is encourage them, which we do weekly," Ms. Stewart said.

She acknowledged the situation "greatly concerns us. But it is beyond our authority to do anything about it."

Nothing can be revealed about the arrangement until March 31, 2007, when the deal will be completed, she said. Then the information will be posted on DFO's website.

Mr. McDonald is not ready to wait until next year.

"We have a good idea how much money in salaries those councillors are taking in each week, and that's in addition to \$36,000 a year for their band council positions. And we know there have been a few people trained and some of them even took part in the fishery," Mr. McDonald said.

"We even have an idea how much the non-natives have made off the deal and, let me tell you, it was more than a few pennies."

One source close to the Yarmouth fishing industry said the native fishery has been a bonanza for local fishermen, captains, boat sellers and fish buyers.

"There are people in Yarmouth who are living well off the native fishery — new boats, new vehicles — it's a racket," said the source who requested anonymity. "It's not right for the average working man, native or non-native. It's the rich guys who get richer every time," he said.

As for Mr. McDonald, he continues to worry about the bills coming in from customers of Indian Brook Fisheries Inc.

"The most aggravating thing is that DFO won't tell me or the rest of councillors who aren't with the quorum exactly what is going on with the finances," he said.

Councillor Stephen Michael, the man who heads up Indian Brook Fisheries, will not speak on the issue. Calls to his office and residence have gone unanswered.

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