

Fish deal benefits just a few, chief says

Shubenacadie band residents 'didn't even get a feed of lobster'

By MARY ELLEN MacINTYRE Truro Bureau



Chief Alex McDonald of Shubenacadie Band in Indian Brook talks with reporters Friday about his efforts to unearth details of a \$5 million fishing arrangement a group of band councilors worked out in his community. (Mary Ellen MacIntyre / Herald)

INDIAN BROOK — Chief Alex McDonald seems just about ready to pull his hair out.

"You've got creditors sending us bills for fuel this band didn't buy and putting liens against boats we didn't buy, and we don't have any idea what other bills are out there," the leader of this Mi'kmaq community said Friday.

"You've got a group of councillors who set up a fishing company, signed a deal with Fisheries and Oceans, got \$5 million and \$20 million worth of licences, and they keep their dealings and operations secret from the chief, the rest of council and the people of this community."

Legal documents obtained by The Chronicle Herald on Friday show two Yarmouth County fuel supply companies claim they are owed a combined total of more than \$30,000, and sheriff's officers were to arrest six of the fishing company's 10 vessels this past week.

Chief McDonald said when he sees the poverty in his community, people trying to feed and clothe themselves on meagre welfare cheques, despair so deep some take their own lives, he can't forgive the councillors who head up Indian Brook Fisheries.

"They get a \$36,000 a year councillor's salary and for most of their term they didn't show up for band council meetings . . . and in addition to their councillors' honorariums some of them are drawing so-called honorariums because of their fishery," he said.

In addition to an undisclosed number of licences for crab, clam, scallop, swordfish and other species, the group has nine lobster licences. Critics claim their landings are purchased by one Wedgeport businessman who also sold them thousands of dollars in used equipment and brokered the purchase of their vessels.

"Who's making any money off this deal and who's benefiting?"

Chief McDonald believes the answer is simple — councillors with Indian Brook Fisheries and some of their relatives; non-native fishing consultants, lawyers, accountants, captains and crews; and a well-connected non-native businessman.

"This band didn't even get a feed of lobster," he said.

Jim Maloney worked for Indian Brook Fisheries until March of this year, when he says he was fired by Coun. Stephen Michael, president and CEO of Indian Brook Fisheries Inc. and Indian Brook Marine Supply, another recently opened company directed by the same group of councillors.

"I was safety officer and I looked after the fit to work program — sure, some people could say I'm talking because of sour grapes, but I've been questioning the whole situation from the very beginning," Mr. Maloney said.

"That's why I got fired — I asked too many uncomfortable questions."

Mr. Maloney said it's important to go right back to the very beginning if anyone is to understand what has happened in this Mi'kmaq community.

"When, in the history of this community, did the people of Indian Brook ever say they wanted to sign a fisheries agreement?"

The band has staunchly refused to sign anything, saying that while it would agree to a management plan and follow the rules set out under legislation, a centuries-old treaty signed by the Mi'kmaq people guarantees natives' right to fish.

"Over the years, we have always said no and there were two referendums held where the people said no — what else do you want?" he said.

Along with Indian Brook, the Bear River band in Yarmouth County and Paq'tnkek (formerly Afton band) in Pictou County are the only holdouts. The other 10 bands in Nova Scotia have all signed deals with DFO.

"They couldn't get us to sign, so they went in the back door," said Mr. Maloney.

The so-called back door was facilitated through negotiations by the Made in Nova Scotia Process, an umbrella agreement signed in 2002. The group, made up of representatives of the federal and provincial governments and the Mi'kmaq people, is charged with negotiating a variety of issues affecting land claims, fishing rights and self-government.

This negotiating group worked out a deal with eight council members, despite two community referendums and in defiance of the chief and other councillors.

"So the deal was worked out and the community has been left in the dark," Mr. Maloney said. "The councillors held their meetings at Tim Hortons or at the airport hotel or a restaurant — as far away from Indian Brook as they can get.

"They can hold their secret meetings off the band's land but when the election begins this fall they'll have to campaign in people's homes, and how are they going to answer the questions?"

Mr. Maloney said he is amazed how the Department of Indian Affairs, Fisheries and Oceans and members of the Made in Nova Scotia Process could ignore the wishes of the people of Indian Brook. "They had to know it was a hornet's nest and it would lead to trouble."

Both Mr. Maloney and Chief McDonald say they can't understand where the eight councillors get their gall.

"It's greed — they sold us out on so many levels — but we'll all end up paying in the end," Chief Mr. McDonald said.

Calls to representatives of Indian Brook Fisheries have not been returned.