

Addressing the Impact of Climate Change on Transportation Infrastructure in Ontario's Far North

Submitted by the Timmins Chamber of Commerce

Co-sponsored by the Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce, North Bay and District Chamber of Commerce, and the Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce

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Issue:

Climate change is threatening the seasonal transportation infrastructure relied upon by many Indigenous communities and businesses alike in Ontario's Far North, leading to socioeconomic challenges that will only worsen as warmer temperatures further reduce winter road access.

Background:

For remote Indigenous communities in Ontario's Far North which are inaccessible by permanent conventional roads or railways, networks of seasonal "winter roads" made of ice or snow provide temporary access to the permanent provincial highway system. These seasonal roads are used by individuals and businesses from freeze-up until spring thaw. They are of significant socioeconomic importance, allowing for goods to be moved at a cost two to three times lower than air transport, which is frequently the sole alternative. As well, the winter roads are often the only option for the transportation of heavier items such as vehicles, equipment, and building materials into these remote communities. In Northern Ontario, 31 First Nations communities depend on thousands of kilometers of winter roads as a lifeline for transportation and shipment of goods¹; these are also a key avenue for resource development projects, such as De Beers' diamond mining and exploration efforts, which depend on the use of the winter roads for the majority of its annual re-supply.²

There has long been a push to develop permanent transportation solutions in the region -- especially given the need to access projects such as the \$60-billion Ring of Fire, a multi-mineral project also located in the Far North – and the call has become more pressing as climate change continuously shortens the duration of the winter roads. This reduced access threatens the economic viability of nearby resource projects as well as the communities themselves, as access to goods and services is also reduced, and the window for specific project activities is shortened considerably. Winter road networks have traditionally been functional for upwards of 80 days per year, a figure that has in some cases shrunk to as low as 28 days.³ This problem is only expected to worsen in the coming years.⁴

As indicated by Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day at the 2016 Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada conference, "shorter seasons have resulted in drastic downturns in local economies"⁵ – a concern expressed by countless Indigenous leaders.

¹ <http://www.republicofmining.com/2016/03/08/invest-north-ontario-and-canada-needs-full-inclusion-of-first-nations-to-kick-start-the-economy-by-ontario-regional-chief-isadore-day-metro-toronto-convention-centre-march-7-2016/>

² <http://aptn.ca/news/2013/02/15/attawapiskat-councillor-accuses-de-beers-of-trickery-as-showdown-looms-on-diamond-mine-ice-road/>

³ <https://news.vice.com/article/canadas-ice-roads-are-melting-and-that-is-terrible-news-for-aboriginal-communities>

⁴ *Enhancing the Resilience of Manitoba's Winter Roads System*: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2014.

⁵ <http://www.republicofmining.com/2016/03/08/invest-north-ontario-and-canada-needs-full-inclusion-of-first-nations-to-kick-start-the-economy-by-ontario-regional-chief-isadore-day-metro-toronto-convention-centre-march-7-2016/>

The need to involve all levels of government was recognized in Sept. 2016, when Canadian Chamber of Commerce AGM delegates adopted a resolution urging federal-provincial partnership to address this specific challenge. It is crucial that the Ontario government receive the same message to ensure a consistent, collaborative approach.

Recommendations:

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Work with Indigenous communities to determine the full impact of climate change on their transportation infrastructure, and work with local and federal governments to subsequently develop a strategy to implement solutions, such as all-season road networks, where appropriate.