COVID-19 CRISIS: GESPEG COUNCIL CALLS ON FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FOR FAIRNESS REGARDING AID MEASURES

Gespeg, **April 20, 2020** - As the COVID-19 crisis rages on, the Micmac Nation Council of Gespeg strongly denounces the federal government's discrimination against its community and demands to be treated fairly. The First Nation currently does not receive the same support as the other Indigenous communities in Canada, on the grounds that Gespeg is not a "reserve" under the *Indian Act.*

Since the beginning of this crisis, the Gespeg Council has assumed its governmental responsibilities towards its members. Like other First Nations councils, it has taken the necessary steps to reduce the impact of the crisis on its members, as well as to provide all relevant information and provide moral and material support to those who are most affected. Despite this, the Gespeg Council faces closed doors and refusals from federal officials in charge of aid programs, on the grounds that the organizational structure of the Gespeg First Nation does not meet certain specific criteria.

Although Gespeg members do not live on reserve lands, the Council assumes several responsibilities identical to those of other First Nations. In addition, Gespeg has an ancestral title and ancestral rights over an unceded traditional territory in the Gaspé region, which has never been sold or been the object of a treaty. Although recognized in principle, the governmental authority of the Gespeg Council, as well as its responsibilities to its members, do not appear to be taken into account by the aid programs adopted by the federal government in order to help Indigenous communities cope with the COVID-19 situation.

The Chief of the Micmac Nation Council of Gespeg, Terry Shaw, reiterates that in times of crisis, the Council is the first instance to which its members turn. They are entitled to receive services tailored to their needs. "The primary government for Gespeg members, regardless of where they live, is the Micmac Nation Council. We have responsibilities towards them, and we have a duty to protect their health and ensure their safety, in addition to minimizing the impacts on our organization. It is completely unacceptable that the health and safety of Gespeg members should be jeopardized by administrative technicalities. We are not asking for preferential treatment, we are simply asking for fairness.", said the Chief.

With the support of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador (AFNQL), Chief Terry Shaw is currently calling upon government authorities, including the Minister of Indigenous Services, Marc Miller. These political steps will hopefully correct this injustice against the Gespeg Council and other councils who may currently be in the same incongruous situation.

"The Prime Minister and his government say there is no relationship more important than the ones with Indigenous peoples. The treatment of Gespeg members and its local authorities certainly does not pass the test, when the existence of reserve land seems to be the decision-making basis for addressing urgent needs in the event of a serious pandemic, where lives may be at stake. In our view, we are in a situation where the decisions we make are a matter of life and death. Minister Miller said yesterday that during the COVID-19 crisis, the health of First Nations, Inuit and Métis is a top priority. This does not seem to be the case for Gespeg," lamented AFNQL Chief Ghislain Picard.

About Gespeg

The Micmac Nation of Gespeg is a Mi'gmaq First Nation composed of some 1500 members, many of them living on their traditional unceded territory located in the Gaspé region. Its Council, composed of a Chief and 9 elected councilors, is recognized as a "band council" within the meaning of the Indian Act, and as a self-governing authority under the Canadian Constitution.

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