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**SEVERAL TREATIES WITH FIRST NATIONS WITHIN REACH
SAYS TREATY COMMISSION ANNUAL REPORT CARD**

VANCOUVER, BC - In its sixth annual report card on treaty progress, the Treaty Commission today expressed optimism that several agreements with First Nations are within reach.

As many as 13 First Nations could have agreements by late-2000 according to the progress report in the Treaty Commission's 1999 Annual Report.

Chief Commissioner Miles Richardson predicts "challenging days ahead as the parties engage in the tough negotiations necessary to conclude fair treaties." Richardson says the public should not be alarmed if upcoming media reports show frustration from the parties in negotiations. "If there is friction in the negotiations, it is a sure sign the parties are fully engaged in the process," he said.

The Treaty Commission was critical of BC, Canada and First Nations - the Principals - in its last annual report saying the treaty process review made necessary by the Supreme Court of Canada decision in the Delgamuukw case was at a "standstill". Since then the Principals have been finding practical ways to remove obstacles to comprehensive agreements following productive talks this past winter.

For example, an agreement on sharing the cost of interim measures is expected soon between the provincial and federal governments that will ease the way to treaties for several more First Nations, says the Treaty Commission. With the majority of First Nations still several years away from agreements the Treaty Commission says the cost-sharing agreement will allow for interim measures to protect First Nations' interest in land, sea and resources until treaties are signed.

Steps are being made to accelerate the negotiations on lands and resources. "This will help restore confidence in the treaty negotiation option," says the chief commissioner in the report.

"Many people are concerned about the cost and slow pace of treaty negotiations," says Richardson. "In considering these concerns, we must not overlook the substantial progress that has been made."

The Treaty Commission began accepting First Nations into the treaty process in December 1993. Today 37 First Nations are working toward agreements in principle and one has been signed; 13 more will soon have that opportunity. In contrast, the Nisga'a treaty took 20 years and northern treaties took 13 to 17 years.

The Treaty Commission continues to look for ways to encourage more efficient and effective negotiations. In recent months, a group of more than 20 First Nations, mostly on Vancouver Island have come together as the First Nations Treaty Negotiation Alliance to develop a common set of negotiating principles. As well, four First Nations straddling the BC-Yukon border are negotiating at a common table.

A high level of public support for the Sechelt agreement in principle, obtained through a concerted consultation effort, also bodes well for the treaty process, says the Treaty Commission. "This approach to consultation within the community is not unique, but is a good working example of a practice that has been adopted at other tables," the annual report concludes.

The 1999 Annual Report provides a progress report on each of the 42 sets of negotiations, a summary of the Sechelt agreement in principle reached in April and a review of the legal and political landscape 18 months after the court's Delgamuukw decision.

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