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First Nations Women Advocating Responsible Mining (FNWARM)

INTERVIEW WITH JACINDA MACK, COORDINATOR

BC Studies Editor: Under what circumstances did the members of FNWARM originally come together?

A number of First Nations women had noticed that they and others were increasingly engaged in raising issues at meetings about mining in their communities. As women on councils or in chiefs' positions, and as mothers and grandmothers, they felt they had a shared perspective and wanted to amplify their voices.

FNWARM was created as an association after a pre-Christmas meeting in Vancouver in 2009. It was called to allow these women to share their experiences and ideas and see if there was an opportunity to work together and in support of each other to address mining issues that they all faced. There was – and FNWARM was born.

Our association represents women from a number of First Nations mostly in central and northern BC.

We are a group that works by consensus. Initiatives are agreed upon and where opportunities arise to raise issues in the media, news releases, etc., are drafted and shared with members before being issued. The chair and mining coordinator do have freedom to respond to breaking news using already agreed upon positions and messaging.

From FNWARM's website:

As leading figures in their communities and as mothers, their priority is to protect their homes, communities and traditional lands and waters from the type of mining practices that have left BC riddled with close to 2,000 abandoned mines – two thirds of which are still spewing pollutants. They came together to share their stories and to work for change. Some have worked for or had family members work for mining companies and have learned first-hand how the promise of riches can quickly turn into destroyed lands and limited low-paying jobs for those whose people have, for millennia, depended on those lands.

Members are aware of the social trauma that mining towns can create for First Nations people of both genders and all ages, but particularly for women and children. To quote FNWARM member and mother-of-three Anne Marie Sam: “I question how my young daughters will be impacted by growing up in a mining town.”

As outspoken proponents for responsible mining and opponents of efforts to impose destructive mining on their lands, they have had to deal with personal attacks from those outside their communities who believe mining projects are the answer to economic prosperity. Even their children have been targeted. Yet they fight on. They have come together to share their stories and to work for change.

In December 2010, FNWARM received the Canadian Boreal Award for its work in promoting responsible mining, and was cited for its leading role in ensuring that the federal government rejected the proposed Prosperity Mine Project that would have destroyed Teztan Biny (Fish Lake) and its environs. The project was a poster child for all that is wrong with the mining system in BC and it is hoped that its rejection will help in the effort to reform that system.¹

Why women?

As mothers, grandmothers, daughters, sisters, we have a unique perspective on how mining affects our communities – their families, rights and traditions and cultures, and the land and waters upon which we depend.

We see the impact on our children as mining brings in outside influences, including drugs, and how it places women at particular risk from violence. We see the pollution impact on the foods that we gather and the fish that we catch and prepare.

We also see the advantages that can be generated by responsible mining, including jobs and other economic benefits that can, done right, help our communities thrive.

What does “Responsible Mining” mean?

Respect for First Nations rights and title; working in partnership with First Nations; respecting the environment; understanding that no means no when the damage that would be caused to the land and water, and to their use by others who depend on them, makes a project unviable;

¹ <http://fnwarm.com/what-is-fnwarm/>

employing best practices to make any acceptable projects safe and ensuring that funds are set aside for reclamation.

Shortly after FNWARM came into existence as a group, it ran an ad in the Vancouver papers in January 2010 during Roundup, and two months later with slight modifications, in national papers to coincide with PDAC (Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada) in Toronto. It ran again during Roundup this year. We attempted to use humour:

Attention BC AME² Roundup attendees – are you a Prince Charming? First Nations women seek sensitive mining companies for meaningful long-term relationships. Must be good listeners, willing to share decision-making, and environmentally, socially and culturally aware. Must clean up after themselves. Money-grubbing gold-diggers need not apply: Contact First Nations Women Advocating Responsible Mining.

In 2017, FNWARM took on other activities, which created a lot of social media attention on Twitter and Facebook:

It took less than an hour for a group of indigenous women to stake a claim on a Cranbrook property owned by Minister Bill Bennett. First Nations Women Advocating Responsible Mining filed an application with the province to become a free miner and then used the ministry's online registry to gain the right to explore a chunk of land that includes Bennett's Key City home.

Coordinator Jacinda Mack says they did this to show how easy it is to claim resources on land without the owner's knowledge or permission. She explains they're trying to highlight the issue of rights entitlement and contradictions in ongoing treaty negotiations with the Province. Mack says they did reach out to Ktunaxa Nation prior to making the claim.

— The Drive FM – BC Indigenous women stake claim on Minister Bennett's Cranbrook property, 31 January 2017.³

² Association for Mineral Exploration.

³ Link, with audio, at <http://thedrivefm.ca/bc-indigenous-women-stake-claim-minister-bennetts-cranbrook-property/>.

What are the key topics or issues that FNWARM seek to address in British Columbia?

The big picture calls for the Mining Tenure Act and other mining regulations to remove mining as a protected priority for land use. We want to ensure all land uses are factored in and that government and industry work with First Nations as equal partners to assess mining prospects and viability. We have always endorsed the rights that were spelled out in 2014 in the Supreme Court of Canada Tsilhqot'in ruling.

Specific issues we are seeking to change include free-entry on line claims staking and destructive placer mining. We also work to support communities such as the Tsilhqot'in's Xeni Gwet'in, to prevent destructive and unacceptable mines from going ahead, and to draw attention to bad mining practices and approaches by companies.

In what ways does FNWARM work towards social justice?

We see social justice as protecting our communities, and others, from having their rights ignored, their land title dismissed, the land and waters they depend on being taken over and polluted, and their societies being exposed to drugs and violence. We want communities to be safe and healthy now and for future generations.

Where mining is allowed, it must be done properly and with the prior and informed consent of First Nations, and in respectful, equal partnership. Where mining is allowed it must be for the benefit of all, not just companies and their investors.

Regarding FNWARM's collaboration with the Fair Mining Collaborative (FMC), see Tara Ammerlaan this issue.

Why seek out researchers?

There are times when we need to quantify the damage being done or the impacts of law and regulations or lack of them. We know what our communities are experiencing, but it is important to show why these things are happening in an empirical way.⁴

FNWARM sought the collaboration of FMC primarily because FNWARM does not have in-house researchers, and we have collaborated before, on other projects, over many years. But more importantly, we col-

⁴ See, for example, Bev Sellars, "Forget Reality TV, Placer Mining a Disaster," *Prince George Citizen*, 28 April 2017. <http://www.princegeorgecitizen.com/opinion/editorial/forget-reality-tv-placer-mining-a-disaster-1.17518014>.

laborate because information on mining in British Columbia is difficult to come by, and available government information is often biased towards industry. For example, when we began our placer mining campaign, we lacked very basic facts, such as how many placer mines are currently permitted to operate in the province. We asked government officials, but the information they provided was at odds with other government sources. It took someone like FMC to undertake an FOI request and several hours of data analysis to come up with an answer to just that question.

What has emerged from your work together?

Placer mining studies are the most recent example. Other studies that involve collaborations include assessing the extent and effectiveness of mining changes in the wake of the Mount Polley disaster and include working on resource management tool kits.

How has the collaboration drawn from different kinds of knowledge practices?

It is symbiotic. First Nations traditional knowledge and on-the-land experiences create a basis for empirical research; they also provide the questions to be asked and identify the data needed to answer them.

What publics (audiences) do you hope to reach? What do you produce together?

The public and, through this group, the politicians who make the laws and regulations. We have also always striven to reach out to the mining industry itself, and although there is still a long way to go, we are sensing increased responsibility and a desire to work with us from some in this sector. For example, the Mining Association of Canada is now a strong supporter of an initiative to create a national network of Indigenous guardians that, among other things, would provide communities with the capacity and skills to address mining.

For further information please visit: <http://fnwarm.com>