

Reconciliation Update: A Look Beyond Resource Engagement

By [Julie Abouchar](#), Partner and Certified Environmental Law Specialist, [Charles J. Birchall](#), Partner and Certified Environmental Law Specialist and [Nicole Petersen](#), Associate.
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September 15, 2016

As we focus on fall activities for resource and infrastructure projects, some may pause to consider the Indigenous issues which are top of mind in provincial and federal governments. More than ever, businesses consulting with Indigenous people have become aware of the historical and cultural context in which they are working.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission wrapped up its work in December 2015; however, the work of reconciliation has just begun. The Commission described reconciliation to be “about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples,” and requires “awareness of past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes and action to change behaviour.”¹ The Commission report presents the hope that reconciliation will support Indigenous people as they heal from the destructive legacies of colonialism and will transform Canadian society so that future generations of Canadians can live together in dignity, peace and prosperity on the lands that we share.

The fall federal government agenda is replete with actions toward reconciliation.

Federal Justice Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould “stirred the pot” with her comments to the Assembly of First Nations meeting this summer, suggesting that the Liberal government was dispensing with any intention of adopting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) directly into law. She then clarified the government’s commitment to adopt the UNDRIP in a way that brings real change for Indigenous peoples. Her initial comments simply acknowledged the complexities of doing so; it cannot simply be adopted through one omnibus piece of legislation but must take into account the fact that numerous long established laws, policies and practices need to be amended.

Last fall, the Coroner’s inquest into suicide in Nunavut resulted in a number of jury recommendations respecting suicide prevention. This led to a declaration by the Nunavut Premier acknowledging that there is suicide crisis in the Territory. In March, the Nunavut government and its partners announced the action plan for suicide prevention for 2016/2017 which focuses on active participation of the partners, building resiliency, and closing gaps in service.

First Nations continue to lack access to safe, clean and reliable drinking water. Health Canada reports that as of July 31, 2016, there were 132 Drinking Water Advisories in 92 First Nation communities. These numbers exclude British Columbia as Health Canada has transferred its role in the design, management and delivery of First Nations health programming in British Columbia to the First Nations Health Authority. However, in 2011, the National Assessment of First Nations Water and Wastewater Systems Report found that 314 First Nations drinking water

¹ Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) page 6-7
http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf

systems were high risk with 154 of them in BC.² The federal budget 2016 promised another \$1.8 billion over five years to “end” long term drinking water advisories on reserves.

This fall, Canada will commence a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIW). The MMIW inquiry was one of the major federal election promises and one of the calls to action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, 2015. The MMIW Commission, following hearings across the country, will make recommendations on concrete actions to remove systemic causes of violence and increase the safety of Indigenous women and girls in Canada. The Commission will publish a final report by the end of 2018.

The commitment to, and government focus on, addressing long standing concerns and grievances of Indigenous peoples has deepened significantly over the last 5 years. Engagement with Indigenous communities takes place with this backdrop. Corporations are also taking actions to pave the way toward reconciliation. These include gestures and expressions of reconciliation, mentor programs for Indigenous youth, cultural awareness training, employment strategies to hire Indigenous people, sponsoring Indigenous events and supporting Indigenous economic development. Engagement on resource projects with Aboriginal communities is taking place in a new era of reconciliation efforts that inevitably must start with an understanding of historic and cultural perspectives of Indigenous peoples.

[Julie Abouchar](#) is a partner at Willms & Shier Environmental Lawyers LLP and Certified as a Specialist in Environmental Law by the Law Society of Upper Canada. Julie can be reached at 416-862-4836 or at jabouchar@willmsshier.com.

[Charles \(Chuck\) J. Birchall](#), is a partner at Willms & Shier Environmental Lawyers LLP in Ottawa and certified as a Specialist in Environmental Law by the Law Society of Upper Canada. Chuck may be reached at 613-761-2424 or at cbirchall@willmsshier.com.

[Nicole Petersen](#) is an associate at Willms & Shier Environmental Lawyers LLP in Toronto. Nikki can be reached at 416-642-4872 or at npetersen@willmsshier.com

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² National Assessment of First Nations Water and Wastewater Systems (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Neegan Burnside, April 2011) page 16 table 3.3 http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-HQ/STAGING/texte-text/enr_wtr_nawws_rurnat_rurnat_1313761126676_eng.pdf