

**First Nations and rural communities present new tourism vision for  
Central Coast and North Island region of British Columbia**  
***Provincial Government urged to support new vision for efficient transportation infrastructure  
and Aboriginal tourism development***

**March 22, 2016, Coast Salish Territories (Vancouver, BC)** – According to a new report, Aboriginal tourism growth in BC's Central Coast region lagged far behind the rest of the province largely as a result of transportation challenges, including the absence of a direct ferry route between Port Hardy and Bella Coola.

A coalition of First Nations bands, tourism operators, associations, communities and destination marketing organizations, called the Mid-Coast BC Ferry Working Group, presented the report: *Tourism Development and Ferry Services: A Vision for First Nations and Rural Communities on BC's Central Coast and North Island* to Jobs, Tourism and Skills Minister Shirley Bond, Transportation Minister Todd Stone and MLA Donna Barnett (Cariboo-Chilcotin) recently in Victoria.

Chief Marilyn Slett of Heiltsuk Nation, who along with Chief Wally Webber of Nuxalk Nation presented the report, noted that to fully realize the economic potential for growth in remote areas throughout the Great Bear Rainforest require efficient transportation infrastructure that enables better movement throughout the region.

While First Nations are optimistic by the initial response of government, they are continuing to put pressure on those responsible to ensure the recommendations in the report are immediately acted upon. Overall, Aboriginal tourism in British Columbia increased by nearly 100 per cent over the past five years, however the report estimated that growth in the Central Coast region amounted to only 15 to 20 per cent over the same period. First Nations and rural partners on the coast are already working with others to enhance transportation opportunities within the interior given the close connection between visitors moving throughout British Columbia.

“While tourism visitation to British Columbia is showing extraordinary growth, our regions are hampered by a lack of transportation infrastructure,” says Chief Slett. “For our communities to grow and prosper we need collaborative action now.”

A preliminary market assessment estimated that 11,000 to 18,000 visitor trips could be stimulated through specific short-term opportunities related to Aboriginal tourism and coastal adventure tourism. The report suggests a three-pronged approach with a focus on destination and product development, particularly with the increased provincial and global attention on the Great Bear Rainforest, co-operative marketing, and transportation infrastructure are necessary to produce an estimated \$10 to \$16 million in annual economic activity, increasing the feasibility of further business ventures and supporting high quality jobs in the region.

Recommendations within the report also include the establishment of a shared vision focused on protecting and responsibly managing the natural environment, culturally sacred areas, and important species; the creation of diverse and dynamic communities supported by efficient, interconnected transportation networks; and support of businesses that preserve and revitalize the area's history and culture, fostering cultural pride and a sense of belonging among residents.

“As elected leadership within Heiltsuk and Nuxalk, we recognize the importance of partnerships in building the potential of Aboriginal Tourism,” says Chief Webber. “It was clear there was a serious commitment by all participants during our meeting and now is the time to show some action.”

Both the Heiltsuk and Nuxalk Nations have been identified as having truly iconic destination potential and could function as anchors for tourism development. The majority of growth opportunities are related to the development of meeting and cultural exhibition spaces such as big-houses, culturally significant historical overland and marine-based trail networks, animal viewing, canoe paddling excursions, pocket cruises and boat tours, and various forms of nature-based guided and interpreted tours.

Further recommendations from the working group, which is made up of the most influential voices in tourism from across the province, include:

- Supporting proposals for the Central Coast and North Island regions in the forthcoming May 2016 Destination BC Expression of Interest process to develop regional destination development plans
- The Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Tourism Association (CCCTA), Aboriginal Tourism BC, and Tourism Vancouver Island (TVI) be tasked to lead efforts for co-operative marketing, to leverage emerging regional brands, particularly the Great Bear Rainforest
- If sufficient tourism demand can be demonstrated, amend the Coastal Ferry Services Contract to enable a direct Port Hardy – Bella Coola sailing for the 2018 summer season

The Mid-Coast BC Ferry Working Group recognizes that the recommendations will take some time to implement, particularly as government takes time to review and respond to the report. To that end, the committee has agreed to work in partnership with the Province on a work plan to support the vision.

#### **Members of the Mid-Coast BC Ferry Working Group**

- Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Tourism Association – Pat Corbett (Co-Chair)
- Aboriginal Tourism Association of Canada – Keith Henry (Co-Chair)
- Tourism Vancouver Island – Dave Petryk
- Aboriginal Tourism Association of BC – Brenda Baptiste/Henry Tso
- City of Williams Lake – Jason Ryll
- BC Hotel Association – James Chase
- Tourism Industry Association of BC – Walt Judas
- Jonview Canada Inc. – Bill Knowlton
- BC Grizzly Tours – Leonard Ellis
- Heiltsuk Nation – Councillor Reg Moody and Travis Hall
- Nuxalk Nation – Chief Wally Weber and Wilma Mack, Admin Director
- West Chilcotin Tourism Association – Petrus Rykes
- Tweedsmuir Park Lodge & Heli-Skiing Centre – Beat and Stephanie Steiner
- Shearwater Resort and Marina – Craig Widsten and Mark Schlichting
- Bella Coola Valley Tourism – Ernest Hall

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#### **Media Contacts:**

Brian Cant, Tartan Group: 250-592-3838, 250-888-8729 (cell) or [brian@tartangroup.ca](mailto:brian@tartangroup.ca)  
Deirdre Campbell, Tartan Group: 250-592-3838, 250-882-9199 (cell) or [deirdre@tartangroup.ca](mailto:deirdre@tartangroup.ca)

## **Identified Recommendations in the Report**

### **Recommendations: Tourism Product and Destination Development**

- That representatives from this Committee and MJTST support proposals for the Central Coast and North Island regions in the forthcoming May 2016 Destination BC Expression of Interest process to develop Regional Destination Development Plans; this report can be used as a launching platform for this process.
- That the Destination Development Plan(s) estimate the demand for tourism in the region, in order to inform potential ferry capacity needs and optimal service routing.

### **Recommendations: Destination Marketing**

- That the Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Tourism Association (CCCTA), Aboriginal Tourism BC, and Tourism Vancouver Island (TVI) be tasked to lead efforts for co-operative marketing. Working backwards from a summer 2018 anticipated new vessel deployment for the Central Coast, marketing would occur in early to mid 2017, requiring applications to be submitted to Destination BC by December 2016.
- That MJTST and MoTI consider the advice of the BC Ferry Commissioner to establish a voluntary additional levy to enhance marketing of B.C. Ferries routes, similar to the MRDT.
- That MJTST, Destination BC, MoTI, and BC Ferries evaluate ways to further integrate branding opportunities for the region and related services that leverage emerging regional brands, particularly the Great Bear Rainforest.

### **Recommendations: Access and Ferry Services**

- That MoTI, MJTST and the Committee commit to evaluating the potential demand for a two-ferry solution in the Central Coast / North Island region, and if sufficient tourism demand can be demonstrated, that MoTI consider amending the Coastal Ferry Services Contract to *enable* a direct Port Hardy – Bella Coola sailing for the 2018 summer season;
- That MoTI, BC Ferries and the Committee work to identify potential route configuration options to maximize ridership on each route, with clear, independent performance targets for capacity utilization on each route used as targets for tourism demand stimulation;
- That the Province of BC and this Committee jointly approach the Government of Canada with a proposal to finance a second small-class (~50 AEQ) vessel for deployment in the Central Coast region;
- That MoTI and MJTST commit to deploying two small-class vessels in the region as a three-to-five (3-5) year pilot project, and with a decision being made that provides adequate lead times for Rendezvous Canada in May 2017 (for wholesalers to sell the 2018 summer season).

### **Supporting Ongoing Work of the Committee**

- That MJTST review the report and respond to recommendations within thirty (30) days;
- That MJTST, MoTI, the Committee, and other stakeholders, upon accepting this report's recommendations, work in partnership to establish a Work Plan to support our joint Vision.