

# GOV'T MONITORING MÉTIS HARVEST IMPACT: IMPACT

By Kristy Lesh  
Herald Tribune Staff

It was on the tip of everyone's tongue at the Alberta Fish and Game Association's annual convention but the minister wasn't about to cross words with the crowd on the controversial Métis harvest agreement signed last fall.

"I'm not here to debate the agreement, nor am I here to debate the court ruling, nor can I make them both disappear" David Coutts, minister of Sustainable Resource Development, said in a speech to delegates at the convention Friday at the Quality Inn.

"We feel that our priority right now and our best course of action is to keep a close eye on the situation. Monitoring is one area where we will be thankful for your help."

The agreement signed last October gives Métis Nation of Alberta cardholders harvest rights like that of Treaty Nations. Discussions began after the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in favour of Métis harvest rights under the Constitution.

The main concern of the AFGA is that having an influx of people harvesting year-round will limit the fish and game resources available to the rest of the residents.

"From what I've heard they seem to be concerned that the resource they have been part of and protecting for so many years, both in the fish and wildlife side, is going to be depleted very quickly," said Coutts in an interview following his speech.

"But part of the interim agreement is conservation of the resource and making sure that all parties understand conservation is the predominant factor. We've got to educate all people in Alberta about the provisions in the interim agreement and some of the restrictions to protect the resource."

Coutts said so far the new agreement has not had a visible impact on the resources.

"The agreement's been in place since September and we're not seeing any noticeable increase in the harvesting of game," he said.

"An area that is more difficult for us is the fisheries side but we're not seeing any marked increase at this time of animals being taken."

The association's position is that the previous system of allowing Métis to harvest only on the eight settlement areas was sufficient for exercising their rights.

“The Alberta government chose to make it wide open,” said AFGA president Ray Makowecki in a recent interview.

“We believe there was sufficient assignment previously, there was no need to extend them.”

That message was echoed throughout the convention on the weekend. But Coutts said the harvest agreement is only an interim one and the government will revisit and monitor it before making any final decisions.

“We’re going to have to look at monitoring and education to make sure conservation does prevail and we’ll be sharing that kind of information with the Métis Avocation and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs as we go forward,” said Coutts. “Whether it will be a permanent agreement is something that will happen in the future but there has been no set date.”