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NEWS RELEASE

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BCAFN Demands Greater Accountability during Rail Safety Week 2021

(Lheidli T'enneh Territory, Prince George, BC) — The BC Assembly of First Nations (BCAFN) is observing Rail Safety Week (September 20 – 26, 2021) by demanding greater accountability from Canadian rail companies. Rail Safety Week aims to save lives by helping the public make safe decisions around trains and tracks. In the spirit of this objective, the BCAFN seeks to call attention to the historical and ongoing impacts caused by railway operations on First Nations, the environment, and wildlife.

“We must acknowledge that the safety of First Nations has been, and continues to be, profoundly affected by railway operations in this country,” stated Regional Chief Terry Teegee. “Historically, railway expansion from east to west played a key role in the colonization of First Nations lands and destruction of the environment contributed to the genocide of First Nations peoples in Canada.”

The mounting impacts of climate change and increasingly extreme weather events endanger the environment, food security, housing, health, and the lives of First Nations, and all Canadians. On June 30, 2021, a wildfire rapidly tore through Lytton, forcing residents and surrounding First Nations to flee. The fire decimated nearly all homes and businesses in the community, and two lives were lost. The cause of the fire is suspect, and an ongoing investigation is underway that will examine whether the heat or sparks from a passing train caused the devastating fire. Regardless, rail operators are responsible for the safety of trains travelling in and out of all communities, including the many First Nations communities in their path. The Canadian government, through Transport Canada and the Canadian Transportation Agency, must urgently and collaboratively work with First Nations and rail companies to research, strengthen and build policies that will better protect and reverse these and other impacts.

Railways are also a significant cause of mortality for many wildlife populations. Moose, deer, elk, bears, and other animals are essential to First Nations' subsistence, culture, and spirituality. Rail companies must consider wildlife safety and the critical roles that

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wildlife play in their ecosystems and for First Nations. Furthermore, First Nations must be included in major railway management decisions, including updating laws and regulations to align with the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as per provincial and federal legislations.

“I would like to see understanding and recognition of how Canadian railway operations have endangered First Nations and impacted our cultures and jurisdictions,” continued Regional Chief Teegee. “Accountability would demonstrate that major Canadian companies, such as CP Rail and CN Rail, are truly committed to reconciliation with First Nations governments in BC.”

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