

Full steam ahead toward native dreams

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VANCOUVER (CP) — A Supreme Court of Canada decision to hear a major aboriginal rights case means it's "full steam ahead" toward natives' dreams of a land claims settlement in a huge area of British Columbia.

"We expected it (the Supreme Court ruling), but it's nice to have it confirmed," Ardythe Wilson, a spokeswoman for the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en office of hereditary chiefs in the community of Hazelton, said Thursday. "It's full steam ahead with the Supreme Court."

Canada's highest court agreed to hear six appeals in aboriginal rights cases, including the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en claim.

No date has been set to hear the appeals, but Wilson said the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en (pronounced GIT-san Wet-SOO-e-tan) expect the case to be heard as early as next spring.

The natives claim about 58,000 square kilometres as their traditional hereditary territory. They will ask the Supreme Court to rule their rights include property ownership, forestry, fishing, mining and water.

In 1991, after some 300 days of court hearings, the chief justice of the B.C. Supreme Court said aboriginal title to the area was lawfully extinguished during colonial times before British Columbia entered Con-

federation in 1871.

Last year, the B.C. Court of Appeal said the natives have aboriginal rights in about half their original claim, but those rights do not include property ownership.

The land in question, vast portions of it still dense wilderness, covers an area almost twice the size of Vancouver Island.

It includes salmon-rich rivers, minerals and forests in the Bulkley, Skeena and Babine river systems.

"The B.C. appeal court gave us a narrow definition of our rights for ownership and jurisdiction," said Wilson.

In Victoria, Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Cashore reiterated the government's stance that it preferred negotiation to litigation and would rather have the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en continue to pursue their goals through the B.C. Treaty Commission.

The commission, designed to deal with the dozens of unsettled land claims throughout B.C., was set up during the lengthy court proceedings that began in 1987.

"They (Gitksan) have filed a statement of claim with the treaty commission," said Cashore, "and I encourage them to work within that process."