

# A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN INDUSTRY AND FIRST NATIONS ROOTED IN FSC STANDARD

WAHKOHTOWIN, MISSANAIBI FOREST AND GREENFIRST

In 1925, Ontario created the world's largest game preserve on a 700,000-hectare area along the northeastern side of Lake Superior.

This forced the removal of two First Nations – the (New) Brunswick House Reserve and The Michipicoten Ojibwa. It also dispossessed them, as well as The Missanabie Cree, the Cree First Nation, and Ojibwe First Nation in Chapleau, from the treaty right to hunt and trap on their traditional lands.<sup>1</sup>

For decades after, the Ontario government issued timber licences to forest management companies for the Superior, Pineland Martel, Magpie and Martel Forests – whose canopy, and tenure, overlapped with most of the preserve. Indigenous communities were frustrated that the forest management model excluded them from protecting the forests despite their being of cultural significance and value. Also excluded: any resulting economic benefits.

Local Chiefs had tirelessly advocated for their hunting and trapping rights for decades, and now they began to seek a say in forest management on their land too. In 2006, the Chiefs made a breakthrough in the form of bilateral agreements with then forest licence holder Tembec – who was pursuing Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification.

The spur was in the FSC standard's requirement to respect the rights of local Indigenous Peoples. It calls for active collaboration and the inclusion of traditional knowledge and perspectives into forest management efforts; both strategically and operationally.

It means that all forest management activities, prior to being operational, are reviewed by community Lands and Resources staff in collaboration with forestry personnel. Stakeholders take joint field visits, whenever needed, to observe the land and understand Indigenous values, after which protection measures are confirmed.

In and around the preserve lands, the standard has enabled more trusting relationships between First Nations and companies such as Rayonier – which gained the forestry licence after Tembec. Now, Indigenous communities could actively participate in forest management decisions, providing a direct link to protect moose habitat, reduce herbicide use, safeguard wetlands and monitor forests through the Indigenous Guardians program.

In the late 2010s, Rayonier (now GreenFirst), agreed to relinquish its single-entity forest license on the

1. Calverley, D. (2009). The Dispossession of the Northern Ojibwa and Cree: The Case of the Chapleau Game Preserve. Ontario History, 101(1), 83–103. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065676ar>

Martel Forest. Meanwhile, Ontario signaled its intent to end its management of the Magpie Forest. This chain of events helped set the foundation for the 2016 formation of Wahkohtowin Development GP.

Wahkohtowin is an Indigenous-led social enterprise with three owner nations – Chapleau Cree First Nation, Missanabie Cree First Nation, and Brunswick House First Nation. It provides one voice to advance new business opportunities in the forestry sector and beyond. They collaborate with industry partners to follow the FSC standard, assess forests, protect habitats, reconnect Indigenous youth with their land and traditions, create carbon benefit projects and even provide an end-to-end First Nations housing solution.

Inspired by the Northeast Superior Regional Chiefs Forum, Wahkohtowin has played a central role in uniting provincial and municipal governments, industry and Indigenous communities together for a new approach to forest management. These efforts have led to a provincial revenue-sharing pilot that allowed for sustained annual financing to communities, a local Indigenous fund, stakes in a local lumber company, and a cogeneration plant that have brought new economic gains including a renewed energy contract.

In 2021, thanks to the work of a 10-member board of directors that included four First Nations Chiefs, a new forest management company was established. The resulting Missinaibi Forest Stewardship Inc.

(MFMI) now holds a new Enhanced Sustainable Forest Licence. And after an expansion audit in November 2023, all the Missinaibi Forest's 1.5 million hectares are now FSC certified.

It's been a 100-year journey in upholding Indigenous rights on the northeast side of Lake Superior. Despite challenges and competing interests, the evolving collaboration will improve conservation efforts, and preserve Indigenous traditions and ensure sustainable forestry persists in Chapleau.

**“What FSC is doing globally and domestically by implementing UNDRIP and FPIC into the national forest stewardship standard not only opens the door for economic opportunities and participation from communities, but also drives ecosystem resiliency.”**

**DAVID FLOOD**

Member of Matachewan First Nation, General Manager, Wahkohtowin Development GP Inc., Registered Professional Forester (RPF)

**“Together with Wahkohtowin, we’ve modified practices outside of the norms, working to reconcile modern forestry practices with the interests of the communities.”**

**CHRIS MCDONELL**

Chief Forester - Ontario, GreenFirst Products, Registered Professional Forester (RPF)

