An Open Letter to Yale University from Chief René Simon, Pessamit Innu First Nation

In May of 2017, representatives from the Pessamit Innu First Nation wrote Yale University’s Investment Office with urgent concerns regarding Yale’s role in facilitating the development of Northern Pass. Northern Pass is a proposed 192-mile power transmission line that will run through New Hampshire. This project would damage the natural environment that has hosted and sustained my people for centuries, violate our rights and autonomy, and disrespect our heritage. It has been over four months since we sent the letter Yale, and we are still waiting for the University to respond.

Yale is facilitating Northern Pass, which aims to transport Hydro-Quebec's energy to Southern New England. The high voltage power line would pass through vast timberlands owned in nearly their entirety by the Yale endowment. Acting on Yale’s behalf, its land manager has leased 24 miles of this land to Eversource, which is the utility company developing Northern Pass. Without Yale’s land, Eversource cannot build the transmission line.

If Yale allows this transmission line to cross its property, the University is enabling a project that will have an indirect, albeit major, effect on our Aboriginal rights. Hydro-Québec has violated principles enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and two international conventions signed by Canada and the United States concerning the protection of salmon. By agreeing to allow the project to cross its land, Yale University in effect joins in these violations of our rights and those of the natural environment.

Hydro-Québec has unlawfully appropriated a territory that was the heart of our culture for centuries. They have damaged our social harmony and rendered us destitute. Our forced migration is a key part of a cultural genocide orchestrated to produce Hydro-Québec’s so-called “green energy.” There are 13 hydroelectric power stations located and operated illegitimately on Pessamit’s traditional territory. They were built without impact assessments, without Pessamit’s agreement, and without compensation. Twenty-nine per cent of the electricity that Hydro-Québec intends to transmit with the proposed Northern Pass Project would be generated by power stations that have been illegally forced upon Pessamit.

The Pessamit are also particularly concerned about how the use of the power stations on the Betsiamites River to supply the New England market will affect Betsiamites river and its salmon population. These stations are designed to meet the lucrative export market associated with periods of peak demand. Hydro-Québec’s hydraulic management of the Betsiamites River, marked by sudden releases of extremely high volumes of water followed by periods of minimal flow, has already had a devastating impact on the river’s salmon population and the iconic Betsiamites River. Massive electricity imports by New England states will accelerate this destruction.

We urge Yale University to take our point of view into consideration in making its decision about the Northern Pass Project, and urge the University to value the principles of international law. We are concerned that Yale’s lack of response to us in over four months and its public-relations statement on the issue indicate that the University has disregarded our concerns and is intent on moving forward with the project. Given the devastating effects of this project, representatives of the University should meet a minimal standard of accountability by engaging in dialogue with the individuals affected by this investment.

We would be pleased to welcome a delegation from Yale University to objectively see the reality of Hydro-Québec's marketed “green energy.”

We are looking forward to collaborating with Yale for a fair and sustainable future.

The Pessamit Innu First Nation Chief

René Simon