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Ottawa, native leaders agree on wording for fisheries deal

The federal government and Atlantic native leaders have agreed on wording that may resolve a dispute over fishing deals.

Lawrence Paul, co-chairman of the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs, said he expects at least 30 of the 35 bands in Atlantic Canada will sign agreements now that wording clearly indicates the three-year deal does not compromise centuries-old treaty rights to fish.

"We've run it past three of our lawyers, and we're very confident this will not come back to haunt us at some future date," said Mr. Paul, who is also chief of the Millbrook reserve near Truro, N.S.

Indian Brook, N.S., Chief Reg Maloney said Saturday he was skeptical there would be anything in a new deal that would get his council to sign on.

Indian Brook was one of two bands that refused to sign deals last year. The other was Burnt Church, N.B.

"I can't help feeling that one way or another, these agreements are compromising our treaty rights," Mr. Maloney said Saturday.

"Once you start getting money, it's pretty hard to turn your back and say 'No, we want to develop our own rules based on our treaty right to fish.' "

The federal government and native leaders have been negotiating the wording for a template agreement for months, but the effort was spurred on in late March, when the one-year agreements signed last year expired without a single band renewing.

Mr. Paul said the final wording was agreed to late Friday afternoon during a telephone conversation with federal fisheries negotiator James MacKenzie. He said it includes four clauses that ensure the agreement does not define, relinquish or extinguish treaty rights.

The deals, reported to be worth about \$375 million in federal funding over three years, will provide the bands with training, gear and boats, primarily for the lobster fishery.

The agreement will likely be the subject of discussion at a chiefs meeting slated for Dartmouth, N.S., on Thursday.

Fisheries Department spokesman André-Marc Lanteigne said he was aware of an exchange of wording proposals between the government and the congress.

But he was unable to confirm that a final draft of the template agreement has been accepted by both sides.