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Auditor general spot-on, say northern leaders

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YELLOWKNIFE - Northern leaders are hailing comments made by the auditor general about the federal government's handling of land claim agreements.

Sheila Fraser was critical of the federal department of Indian and Northern Affairs' handling of the Inuit land claim in Nunavut and the Gwich'in settlement in the Northwest Territories.

The auditor general says Indian and Northern affairs fails to measure how well it's reaching objectives agreed to by Ottawa, aboriginal groups and the territorial governments.

- LINK: [Auditor General's report on Indian and Northern Affairs \(.pdf file\)](#)

Fraser says Indian Affairs should focus more on the spirit and less on the letter of land claims agreements.

Instead of pursuing the overall objectives of the Nunavut and Gwich'in claims, it focuses only on meeting its legal obligations.

"When we are negotiating the land claim agreements and the implementation of those agreements, of course we are defining the objectives," says Michel Roy, Indian Affairs' assistant deputy minister of claims and Indian government.. "But to meet those objectives we have to identify the obligations. So, for us, meeting the obligations means meeting the objectives."

The Gwich'in Tribal Council disagrees, saying in a news release after the report's release that its role in implementing the claim has been hampered by chronic underfunding by Indian Affairs.

The department says that, though it does fund the Gwich'in Tribal Council council, it has no obligation to give it anything, let alone adequate funding.

- FROM FEB. 10, 2004 : [Auditor general takes aim at INAC land claim management](#)

Inuit employment an issue

The auditor general also pointed to a section in the Nunavut land claims that calls for more Inuit in government.

Sheila Fraser says 10 years after the Nunavut land claim agreement was signed, the department still hasn't determined if federal actions to increase Inuit participation are working.

That's what Nunavut Tunngavik has been saying for years.

"Under article 23, Inuit have a right to employment at 85 per cent," says John Lamb, NTI's chief executive officer. "Starting with the fact that Inuit are currently being employed at half that level translates into enormous dollars in lost income."

Nunavut Tunngavik was interviewed several times by the Auditor general's office in preparation for the report.

Richard Paton is with NTI. He says the federal government can now make several improvements.

"They have the opportunity to show Inuit, that they are willing to work with us on making the changes that will see us 10 years from now with more opportunities for Inuit than they have today," he says. "We will see less of the social impacts that Inuit are facing today in terms of any number of social problems that we have."

Both Lamb and Paton say the timing of the report is good, with a new prime minister and a new minister of Indian and Northern Affairs in Ottawa.

Now they hope the federal government will take the auditor general's report and ensure obligations under the Nunavut land claims agreement are met.