



## Premiers committed to building a healthy, strong and resilient North

Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet), Nunavut (May 9, 2024) – Premier P.J. Akeeagok welcomed Premier Ranj Pillai and Premier R.J. Simpson to Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet), Nunavut, for the annual Northern Premiers’ Forum. Premiers had the opportunity to visit the high Arctic and meet and learn from the Hamlet of Pond Inlet, the Qikiqtani Inuit Association and Elders and community members. They appreciated the strength of collaboration amongst community, Indigenous and territorial leadership on wellness and diversified economic development. Premiers discussed shared issues impacting the North, including Arctic security and sovereignty, disaster preparedness and response, critical infrastructure gaps, housing needs, and the health and well-being of Northerners.

Recognizing modern treaty holders have their own relationship with the Government of Canada, Premiers welcomed the announcement around the Commissioner for Modern Treaty Implementation as partners in treaty implementation.

### Arctic security and sovereignty

Meeting along the Northwest Passage reaffirmed to Premiers that communities like Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet) are the foundation to Canada’s sovereignty in the Arctic. For years, Premiers have raised the profile of Arctic security, and the role Northerners play in a secure and sovereign Arctic. Premiers were pleased to see those efforts acknowledged in the recently announced updates to Canada’s national defence policy, *Our North Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada’s Defence*. Premiers welcome federal efforts to improve Arctic security and the commitment to work with northern leaders to ensure investments like multi-use infrastructure, such as deep water ports, support the shared regional interests across Canada’s territories. They also noted the need for improved federal search and rescue capacity in the Arctic and the North. The defence policy will play an important role in addressing critical infrastructure gaps, supporting economic and social development in the North, and strengthening communities, while meeting national defence and security needs.

## **Addressing critical infrastructure gaps**

Substantial investment in critical infrastructure areas including transportation, energy, and telecommunications is needed to address significant gaps across northern communities. Premiers emphasized that these investments are vital not only for enhancing community resiliency, but also for stimulating economic development. For example, when the energy, telecommunication, and transportation corridors required by modern mining operations are in place there will be greater opportunity for critical mineral development throughout our territories.

Additionally, Premiers emphasized the need for federal collaboration in designing tailored infrastructure programs that prioritize climate resilience. Premiers are eager to see the federal government announce a successor to the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program. Premiers reiterate that flexible funding allocations from the federal government, delivered on a base-plus per capita basis, are required to address territory-specific infrastructure priorities effectively.

## **Emergency preparedness and management**

The territories are at the forefront of the effects of climate change, which compounds all of the other issues they discussed. Premiers reflected on the 2023 flood and fire season and the lessons learned from their experience. They expressed gratitude to all first responders and volunteers that worked tirelessly in response to those disasters. The outreach and support from across Canada and from international partners were significant, and continued cooperation will be needed as another flood and fire season gets underway. They discussed updates to community planning and approaches to working with Indigenous governments, municipalities, businesses, and other sectors. Premiers reiterated the importance of collaboration and cooperation across jurisdictions and with all orders of government to prevent, respond, manage, and recover from natural disasters.

Over the last decade, the territories have experienced unprecedented growth in the frequency and severity of drought, wildfires, and floods driven by climate change. It is clear that there is a need for a new and sustainable federal approach to respond to the resulting emergencies. Territories do not have the fiscal capacity to fund ongoing disaster management at the current scale. They called on the federal government to modernize emergency response policies and funding in the territories. These changes must ensure timely, flexible, adequate, and culturally appropriate support and funding is available in responding to emergency events, and to provide additional disaster mitigation funding to better prepare northern communities for future threats.

With their meeting falling during Emergency Preparedness Week, Premiers encourage all Northerners to be prepared for possible fire, flood, or other risks by having an emergency plan for their families and pets, making a 72-hour emergency kit, insuring their property when possible, and taking steps now to protect their homes and belongings.

### **Healthy, resilient, and prosperous northern communities**

Substance use continues to impact northern communities. Premiers discussed their efforts to improve supports for mental health, expand treatment and harm reduction options, and address the increasing availability and public safety impacts of illicit drugs in their communities. They spoke about the need to expand treatment options across the continuum and specifically to include aftercare within home communities.

The health and well-being of Northerners remains top of mind for Premiers. They appreciate federal efforts to reflect northern needs in health funding agreements and agreed that continued collaboration is needed. Escalating health costs continue to take up a significant portion of territorial budgets. The increases to the costs of travel, including for Non-Insured Health Benefits and covered dental care, have been a driver. An area of significant concern is flexible funding to replace health infrastructure, including information technology systems.

Premiers discussed the challenge of filling healthcare jobs across the three territories, particularly as the competition to fill these positions increases both nationally and internationally. They committed to sharing best practices in the area of health human resources.

Premiers discussed the federal legislation tabled on national universal pharmacare and look forward to receiving more information from the federal government on the program's rollout, including coverage for high-cost drugs for rare diseases. Any policies contemplated must consider the distinct needs of the territories, including their fiscal capacity and large Indigenous population. Premiers take great interest in developing health systems that address inequities and look forward to working with the federal government toward that shared goal.

### **Ensuring housing needs are met across the North**

Affordable, sustainable, and secure housing is critical to the success of Northerners. Premiers discussed acute challenges in addressing housing needs across the North, including higher construction costs, limited local labour force and scarcity of housing supply in remote and isolated locations. Committing to close collaboration with the federal government and Indigenous government leaders, they aim to create comprehensive housing programs including supportive housing and improve affordability throughout the territories.

Premiers will continue their work to enhance support for the provision of sustainable housing in the North. Housing is also an area where there is potential to support residents in gaining education, skills, and experience in the trades. They called on the federal government to work with northern leaders to develop and execute federal housing programs, including appropriate financial commitments and program flexibility to adequately address all aspects of the housing continuum, including access to lands, in the territories. This includes working with Indigenous governments to achieve their housing aspirations.

### **Engagement with federal ministers**

On Sunday, May 5, in Iqaluit, ahead of the Northern Premiers' Forum, Premiers held meetings with the Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of National Defence, and the Honourable Dan Vandal, Minister of Northern Affairs. Premiers appreciated the federal ministers' visit to the North and their focus on Arctic issues. Premiers reaffirmed their commitment to collaboration and emphasized the unique infrastructure, security, and sovereignty needs of the North. They emphasized the need for further and ongoing engagements with Indigenous governments and organizations in all three territories. They called for continued federal engagement and investment to ensure the well-being, resilience, and prosperity of northern communities and residents.

Finally, Premiers reiterated their commitment to working together to create a long-term prosperous future for territorial residents and all of Canada and look forward to working with their provincial colleagues at the upcoming Western Premiers' Conference and the Council of the Federation later this summer.

The Yukon was confirmed as the chair of the Northern Premiers' Forum for the 2025 calendar year.

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