

Quebec unveils \$80 bln plan for undeveloped north

May 10 2011, by Michel Viatteau



Quebec's Prime minister Jean Charest, pictured in 2010, unveiled an \$80-billion plan on Monday to develop the Canadian province's vast north over 25 years.

Quebec unveiled an \$80-billion plan on Monday to rev up forestry and mining development over the next 25 years in its vast northern region, dubbed one of the world's last unspoiled wildernesses.

Quebec Premier Jean Charest rolled out his "North Plan" as Canada emerges from a recession, promising to create or support 20,000 jobs annually in the farming, forestry, mining and tourism sectors north of the 49th parallel.

It is an "ambitious project," he told a press conference, one that has elicited praise from the business community, in "one of the last untouched territories of the world, filled with riches."

The huge region being targeted for renewal is more than twice the size of France, but is inhabited by only 128,000 people or 1.6 percent of the Canadian province's population.

And Charest's bluster failed to sway

[environmentalists](#) who panned the plan for its lack of transparency, and native peoples who lamented that the Quebec government was trampling on their land rights.

The proposal for the 1.2 million square kilometer zone will require integrating 10 northern ports, 46 airstrips, 1,190 kilometers (740 miles) of railroads and 51,000 kilometers (32,000 miles) of roads to improve access.

Upgrading several airports and extending highways, and renewing the mostly French-speaking province's northern telecommunications infrastructure are also in the works.

The funding will come from both provincial coffers and private investment, said a government statement.

"For more than a year, unprecedented consultations took place to draw up this grand-scale project," Charest said.

"Now we're ready to realize the territory's full potential in energy, mining, forestry, biofoods and tourism," he said. "And we will do it by improving living conditions for the local population and while protecting the environment and fragile ecosystems."

At least 11 new mining projects could be launched in the first few years in the region believed to be rich in nickel, cobalt, platinum, zinc, iron ore, diamonds, lithium, vanadium, and rare earth metals.

To fuel the increased economic activity an additional 3500 megawatts of renewable energy is to be generated from new regional wind and hydroelectric power projects.

Charest pledged investments in farming in the area, which now spans 8,500 hectares, and forestry

which is already producing 11.7 million cubic meters (c) 2011 AFP of wood each year.

His government also proposed protecting from development half of the territory, safeguarding its biodiversity and beauty for tourism.

The territory is home to 237 bird species, 20 species of fur-bearing animals, and a dozen fish species of interest to sport fishermen. There are currently 186 outfitting operations in the area.

Some environmental groups applauded the sustainable development measures outlined by Charest's government, and the protection of 600 square kilometers of land.

"We commend Premier Jean Charest for announcing the largest land conservation policy in history," said Mathew Jacobson of the Pew Environment Group.

The plan covers an area twice the size of Texas and "seeks to balance conservation with development in a region that is home to some of the world's largest remaining intact landscapes," he noted.

"Quebec's vision of integrating economic development and conservation on such a grand scale is unprecedented," he added.

But others said they could not support it, saying major reforms were first needed in the province's resources and energy sectors.

They pointed to an obsolete mining law that Charest has pledged to review, and doubted that more than 20 percent of the region, which includes Canada's boreal forest and large herds of woodland caribou, would actually be protected.

Christian Simard of Nature Quebec decried what he called a "rush to the north on the heels of the gold rush" and a "bad plan."

Some aboriginal groups also criticized the proposals, saying their land rights were being trampled on by the Charest government.

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