



Okanagan Nation Alliance

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MEDIA RELEASE

Okanagan River Chinook Recommended for Endangered Species Listing

May 9, 2005 Westbank – The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), has recommended that the Minister of Environment emergency list Okanagan River chinook as endangered under Canada's Species at Risk Act based on an Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA) stock status report. The classification of this population will ensure that the Federal government will have a statutory and legal obligation to recover this population.

"This is about protecting the Title and Rights of the Okanagan Nation", states Chief Stewart Phillip, ONA Chairman. "By protecting and recovering this important species, we can work to ensure that our children and grandchildren will continue to have constitutionally protected fishing rights in our Territory. Our people want to be able to fish again."

Historically chinook salmon were an important part of the Okanagan Nation fishery in the Okanagan River, but currently there is no chinook fishery because their population has declined to the brink of extirpation. The severe decline of Okanagan River chinook can be attributed to a number of factors, including commercial fisheries in the ocean and lower Columbia River, construction of mainstem Columbia River and Okanagan River dams and diversions, habitat alterations, channelization and water withdrawals.

ONA Title and Rights Advisor, Byron Louis adds that, "Chinook are an integral part of our environment and our culture and we have not been able to fish for them as part of our ceremonial and food fisheries for at least half a century".

It is estimated that there are less than 50 chinook adults that return yearly to the Okanagan River in Canada, but very little is known about the population. Some preliminary genetic analysis has been completed, but because the sample size is small, there is inconclusive evidence to determine whether or not this is a unique population, separate from the Okanagan chinook population in Washington State.

For decades, the federal government has considered chinook extirpated from the Okanagan Basin, and because of this, no resources had been dedicated to studying this stock and they were simply recorded as a side bar in other studies. Following several years of observing chinook juveniles and adults in the Okanagan River, the ONA took steps to develop their independent stock status report last year calling attention to the lack of support for this beleaguered stock.

The Okanagan Nation is calling for Minister Geoff Regan of Fisheries and Oceans Canada to meet with the ONA to meet his consultative and fiduciary requirements for access to Okanagan chinook for food, social and ceremonial purposes, and prior to providing his recommendations to the Minister of Environment Stephane Dion. Significant resources will be needed to conduct further studies and research to help us understand this unique population in order to effectively recover this stock.

"There have been recent instances in BC where salmon have not received an adequate level of protection, so we would encourage Minister Regan to do the right thing, and help us protect Okanagan River chinook by having them declared as endangered.", says ONA Chairman, Chief Stewart Phillip.

BACKGROUND:

- Okanagan River chinook salmon are the only remaining Columbia Basin Chinook that return to Canada.
- It is estimated that the annual return of Okanagan River chinook spawners is less than 50 adults
- Commercial and sport chinook fisheries that occur in the Columbia River, have an unknown impact on Okanagan River chinook.
- The development of an Okanagan River Chinook Stock Status Report is the first step in recovery efforts for this population.
- The status report was submitted in September 2004 to the Species Specialist Committee (SSC) of Marine Fishes for review and evaluation to consider if listing through COSEWIC was warranted. Upon review by the SSC, it was felt that Okanagan chinook were a unique population and warranted assessment by COSEWIC, and it would be assessed in May 2006.
- In early March 2005, the ONA identified that there would be significant increases in the Columbia River chinook harvest over the 2005 fishing season that could negatively impact Okanagan River chinook. Because Okanagan chinook most likely migrate with the Upper Columbia summer chinook run, there is the potential that Okanagan chinook could inadvertently be harvested, before ever reaching their spawning grounds in Canada. This could be devastating to a population estimated at less than 50 adults.
- Upon review by the Species Specialist Committee for Marine Fishes, it was felt that a separate Canadian Okanagan chinook population exists and given harvest threats in the Columbia River, is in imminent danger of extirpation and therefore recommended for assessment by COSEWIC.
- The Okanagan chinook population was emergency assessed by COSEWIC in May 2005 in and classified as endangered.
- The Minister of Environment, Stephane Dion will make a recommendation to the Federal Cabinet on whether an emergency listing is warranted.
- If the Minister of Environment recommends not listing through the emergency assessment process, the Okanagan chinook will be assessed at the May 2006 COSEWIC meetings under the normal assessment procedure.
- Raising awareness and potential listing of this population will ensure that recovery efforts for Okanagan chinook will be required to meet the long-term goal of future Okanagan Nation harvest.
- Restoration will require extensive coordination with government agencies and the public.
- The of Fisheries and Oceans Canada has a fiduciary obligation to provide the Okanagan Nation the opportunity to fish for food, social and ceremonial purposes
- The protection of Okanagan Nation fisheries is an issue of protecting Aboriginal Titles and Rights .

For more information contact:

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