



OKANAGAN NATION ALLIANCE

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Okanagan Nation Alliance Questions DFO's Commitment to Species at Risk

Westbank, BC – After waiting almost a month for Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) to respond to their letter regarding an endangered listing for Okanagan Chinook, the Okanagan Nation Alliance is questioning Minister Regan's commitment to salmon recommended for listing under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). All has not been well between the Federal Government's Species at Risk Act and the Okanagan Nation Alliance due to the social, cultural and economic impacts upon the Okanagan Nation.

“On Friday, the DFO Regional Director General, Paul Sprout, finally responded and scheduled a meeting with us,” said Program Manager Deana Machin. “Their silence to date has been telling.”

“Our informal discussions with DFO regional staff indicate that DFO may not support the listing due to a lack of information on the stock,” stated Senior ONA Fisheries Biologist, Howie Wright. “But the Species at Risk Act (SARA) clearly states that the Minister cannot rely on uncertainty as a reason not to list - he must err on the side of caution.”

There has never been a DFO chinook assessment program in the Okanagan and no funds are allocated to monitor the population at this time. Lack of federal commitment has, in part, lead to the deficiency in knowledge on Okanagan Chinook.

Okanagan Chinook are the last run of chinook returning to Canada through the Columbia River system, and in recent years, there have been less than 50 adults observed annually. The Okanagan Chinook run was almost destroyed when Grand Coulee Dam was built in 1939 and Fisheries and Oceans Canada effectively turned its back on its responsibility for domestic salmon stocks in the Columbia. Today the few remaining fish face the looming threat of increased fishing in the US Columbia mainstem.

Okanagan Nation Title and Rights Advisor Byron Louis hopes that this won't be Grand Coulee all over again. “Without an independent body to ensure that Minister acts on his domestic responsibility to list these fish, the Okanagan people are at risk of having their title and rights infringed upon again, and all Canadians risk losing another precious run of wild salmon.”

The Okanagan Nation Chiefs affirm that they assert full collective ownership of their territorial lands and resources which include Chinook. With the very real threat of losing another struggling population of fish, the Okanagan Nation Alliance is considering its legal options if the Okanagan Chinook are not listed. “We have had a solid science-based working relationship with DFO on sockeye salmon assessments and we would like to build upon that relationship to include Okanagan Chinook recovery through the Species at Risk Act.” said Chief Stewart Phillip, ONA Chairman “Recovery of Okanagan Chinook will be more readily accomplished if we can work cooperatively together on the river rather than slug it out with DFO in the courts.”

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