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PROPOSED “WORKING FOREST” MODEL RAISES CONCERNS FOR SYILX OKANAGAN TERRITORY

tkwəłniwt (Westbank), Syilx Okanagan Nation Territory: The syilx Okanagan Nation is raising concerns about British Columbia’s proposed Working Forest Landscape Model (WFLM) and what the creation of a designated “Working Forest” could mean for the future management of lands and waters within unceded syilx Okanagan Territory.

On August 27, 2026, the Province announced it is exploring a new Working Forest Landscape Model (WFLM) that would designate forest lands into three zones: Working Forest, prioritizing commercial timber production; Multiple-Use, supporting biodiversity, ecosystem function and other uses in concert with fiber production; and Conservation and Protection, focused on long-term ecosystem function, habitat, and biodiversity. The Province plans to begin exploring the model in selected areas this fall.

For the syilx Okanagan Nation, designating lands as a “**Working Forest**” raises fundamental questions about how the health of the land is valued and who determines its future. Forests are more than a timber supply—they are interconnected living systems that sustain water, wildlife, foods, medicines, biodiversity, cultural practices and syilx responsibilities to the land. Prioritizing commercial timber production through long-term land-use designations could have significant implications for syilx Aboriginal title and rights, governance, stewardship responsibilities, cultural use, conservation priorities and future land-use decisions.

“A forest cannot be defined only by the timber that can be taken from it. Our forests hold water, provide habitat, sustain our foods and medicines, and carry generations of syilx knowledge and responsibility. Decisions about how these lands will be managed must begin with the health of the land and the involvement of the title holders whose territories are being affected,” said Councillor Jordan Coble, Chair of the ONA Natural Resources Committee.

There also remain significant unanswered questions about how the proposed Working Forest Landscape Model would operate, including how boundaries would be established, what legal or policy effect the zones would have, how ecological and cultural values would be protected, and how Indigenous Title holders would participate in determining whether lands within their territories are appropriate for designation.

The syilx Okanagan Nation is particularly concerned that creating areas where timber production is established as the dominant objective could limit future opportunities to protect and restore areas important for water, fish and wildlife habitat, biodiversity, cultural use and other syilx values. The Province has connected the WFLM to broader efforts to modernize forest management in BC. However, important questions remain about how prioritizing timber production within a Working Forest Zone aligns with

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commitments to biodiversity, ecosystem health, old-growth protection and collaborative forest landscape planning.

The syilx Okanagan Nation maintains that decisions of this scale cannot be made within unceded syilx Okanagan Territory without the early and substantive involvement of syilx title holders. “Certainty for the forest industry cannot come at the expense of the land, water, wildlife or future generations. A modern approach to forestry must recognize Indigenous title and jurisdiction and ensure ecosystem health is not secondary to timber supply. The Syilx Forestry Principles & Standards set our expectations for forestry within syilx Okanagan Territory. Provincial zoning will not replace our laws, responsibilities, standards or role in making decisions about our lands and resources,” stated xaʔtus Chief Clarence Louie, Tribal Chairman of the ONA.

As BC considers the future of forest management, the Nation calls on the Province to work directly with syilx Title holders before advancing Working Forest designations within syilx Okanagan Territory and to demonstrate how any proposed model will uphold Indigenous Title and Rights while prioritizing the long-term health of the land.

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