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Syilx Chiefs and Local Leaders Sign Historic Agreement to Address Water Issues Across the Okanagan and Similkameen Watersheds

Snpink'tn, Penticton, Syilx Territory: Today, at a historic gathering, Chiefs of the Syilx Nation, Mayors, councillors and Regional Districts representatives signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to protect *siwtkw*, water. The Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) is the first time that elected leaders from the Syilx Nation and Local Governments have come together to discuss issues of common concern that transcend jurisdictional boundaries. The MOA supports a shared pathway to address watershed challenges and opportunities.

The signatories to the MOA represent 126 elected leaders who have formalized their shared commitment to protecting water and we hope remaining districts and municipalities join this agreement in the future. This signals a new era of cooperation, collaboration and action for reconciliation. Chief Gabriel of the Penticton Indian Band acknowledged that “the signing of the MOA and creation of the leaders table developed through the Collaborative Leadership Initiative (CLI) has been a long time coming and provides leaders who know their watersheds best, a platform to discuss and act on water challenges that are too big for any one government to solve alone”.

The CLI process is a collaborative and inclusive engagement process that builds relationships based on respect, trust, cooperation and partnerships. Facilitated by the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources (CIER) the leaders have been meeting for the past 18 months to build trust and to draft the MOA. Victor Cummings, Mayor of the City of Vernon commented “that there are very few opportunities and processes for leaders to come together and work together, CLI facilitation was important in supporting the leaders as they developed the MOA.”

The MOA identifies, shared principles, goals, areas of common concern and next steps that include the development of a Terms of Reference - providing a framework for how the Leaders will work together as neighbours and in partnership.

Chief Robert Louie from Westbank First Nation reminded the leaders “that the health of our water impacts everyone of us in this room, it affects our families and anybody who lives here and visits here. In our culture and in our beliefs - water is sacred, without it, we cannot live.”

Penticton Mayor Julius Bloomfield provided opening remarks and set the tone of the celebratory signing of the MOA, by encouraging the leaders that “this is our opportunity to build a new history together.”

Syilx Elder *caylx*, Richard Armstrong who has provided guidance throughout the CLI process commented that “as you move forward, I encourage you to make a commitment to working together for the benefit of the water that we share. *siwtkw* connects us all, this connection flows through our communities, it carries with it a responsibility that we should not take lightly. I hold my hands up to each of you for taking the first step in protecting our water”.

The leaders plan to convene their next meeting in the coming months to get the important work ahead of them demonstrating reconciliation in action.

“By creating the Okanagan Similkameen Collaborative Leadership Table and committing to working closely together on matters of concern in your two watersheds now for generations to come you will accomplish far more and bestow more benefits on the region than you can presently imagine”.

— **Robert Sandford, Senior Government Relations Liaison, United Nation University.**

"What is especially inspiring is how this agreement came to be. This is a Syilx-led approach to co-governance rooted in values, protocols and stewardship practices that have sustained these lands and waters since time immemorial..."As the newly formed Canada Water Agency advances its mandate to foster collaborative governance and coordination in water management Nation-wide, this Memorandum of Agreement shines as a remarkable example of that vision in action. Your shared priorities protecting headwaters, restoring ecosystems, addressing climate impacts, and safeguarding of water quality align closely with the Agency's goals."

— **Terry Duguid, Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and Special Advisor for Water**

This agreement supports the frameworks and implementation of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the BC Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA). The Agreement lays a foundation for government-to-government relationships between the Syilx Nation and Local Governments through a collaborative and inclusive engagement process that builds relationships based on respect, trust, cooperation and partnerships. Chief Clarence Louie from Osoyoos Indian Band comments that this is the first time a gathering like this has been done. Long overdue. Native leadership is in the same room as non-Native leadership."

The establishment of the Collaborative Leadership Table was designed to support the ongoing work of the Syilx Nation and its efforts to work with all levels of government through the Okanagan Lake Responsibility Initiative that was initiated in 2019. In 2022, ONA and the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources began discussion on how to implement a Collaborative Leadership Initiative in the Okanagan and Similkameen regions. The formation of the Collaborative Leadership Table is a direct result of their involvement.

For more information on this initiative, please contact:

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