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Syilx Okanagan Nation Chiefs Condemn UBC Professors' Legal Challenge to First Nations' Land Acknowledgments

(Unceded Syilx Okanagan Territory: Kelowna, BC) – The Chiefs of the Syilx Okanagan Nation express profound disappointment and condemnation regarding the recent legal action initiated by a group of professors from both the University of British Columbia's Okanagan and Vancouver campuses. This lawsuit challenges the university's acknowledgment of residing on unceded First Nations land, including Syilx Okanagan territory—a fact that is both historically and legally recognized.

The petition, filed in the B.C. Supreme Court, alleges that UBC's statements acknowledging unceded First Nations territory are political and infringe upon academic freedom. The professors involved seek to prohibit the university from making such acknowledgments, arguing that they compel conformity to specific political beliefs.

Chief Clarence Louie, Chair of the Chiefs Executive Council (CEC), stated that, "The recognition of unceded Syilx Okanagan land is not a political maneuver; it is an acknowledgment of historical truths and legal realities. Attempts to silence these acknowledgments are attempts to erase Syilx Okanagan presence and rights."

Chief Robert Louie of the Westbank First Nation also added that, "Academic Educational institutions have a duty to foster environments of truth and reconciliation. Challenging the acknowledgment of unceded Syilx Okanagan territories undermines this duty and disrespects the Syilx Okanagan communities whose lands these institutions occupy."

The Syilx Okanagan Nation emphasizes that land acknowledgments are essential steps toward reconciliation and education about Canada's colonial history. Such acknowledgments align with the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, urging educational institutions to integrate First Nations knowledge and perspectives.

UBC's approach is also in line with the commitments made by both the Government of Canada and the Province of British Columbia to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). These commitments include recognizing the rights of First Nations to their lands, territories, and resources, and affirming the necessity of free, prior, and informed consent in decisions that affect them. Recognizing unceded territory is a foundational expression of these principles.

As part of advancing this work, UBC has adopted internal frameworks—such as the Strategic Equity and Anti-Racism (StEAR) Framework—that prioritize decolonization, inclusion, and the

integration of First Nations perspectives. The StEAR Framework supports the university's responsibility to create learning environments grounded in truth, equity, and respect for the First Peoples of these lands.

The Chiefs call upon UBC to steadfastly uphold its commitment to truth and reconciliation by continuing to acknowledge the unceded territories of the Syilx and other First Nations peoples, and to reject any attempts that aim to diminish First Nations rights and histories.

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