OKANAGAN NATION ALLIANCE
101 - 3535 Old Okanagan Hwy, Westbank, BC V4T 3L7
Phone 250-707-0095 Toll Free 1-866-662-9609 Fax 250-707-0166 www.syilx.org

August 22, 2025

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship
PO Box 9012 STN PROV GOVT
Victoria, BC V8W 9L6
WLRS.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Attention: Honourable Randene Neill
Minister of Water, Land and
Resource Stewardship

Re: Urgent Meeting Requested About Drought Levels in the Okanagan and Similkameen

We are writing to you as drought levels in our syilx Okanagan Territory[1] are being set at 0 in the Okanagan basin by Water, Lands and Resource Stewardship even as Nation monitoring shows low flows in many of our creeks and streams, fish are being impacted, and the forecast continues for hot dry weather. The Similkameen watershed, currently experiencing the most severe drought in the province and classified at Level 4, should be considered Level 5. Record-low flows, persistently high water temperatures throughout the summer, and continuously declining groundwater levels support this assessment. We are concerned that your Ministry's new method for setting drought levels has created this situation where worsening conditions in our Territory are not reflected in the drought levels set by the Province.

Until 2025, drought levels were set collaboratively based on information including on-the-ground observations by First Nations, local, regional, provincial and federal staff. Drought levels were set at the catchment-scale rather than the basin-scale, which supported responsive water management decision-making. The new revised method removed the consensus approach and the ability to include site-specific data. This has produced a troubling disconnect between the Province's assigned drought levels and the reality in our Territory where streams and wetlands are drying up.

As you know, the Crown has a constitutional duty to consult when it contemplates decisions that may have an adverse impact on Aboriginal or Treaty Rights. The 2016 *Water Sustainability Act* (WSA) was passed without adequate consultation with Syilx People despite having high potential for significant impact. Under DRIPA, the Province has a duty to take a collaborative approach to the development of mechanisms for resource management. Despite this, since 2016, the Province has continued with WSA phased implementation and developed key regulations—including the revised framework for setting drought levels—without consulting Syilx People.

[1] Syilx territory is located in the South Thompson, Lower Thompson, Nicola, Okanagan, and Similkameen basins of the Thompson Okanagan Region defined by the Province of BC.

Currently, the Province states that drought levels are not tied to water management actions. The position of ONA is that drought and water management are explicitly connected, and that the separation of drought levels and management actions by the Province is disingenuous.

Maintaining the integrity of our relative siwɬkʷ (water) is essential to our identity as Syilx People and survival is entrenched in our responsibility to our homelands and "for the people to be". Therefore, the Okanagan Nation Alliance (ONA) will continue to take an active approach to exercising our jurisdiction and fulfilling our sacred responsibility for the sustainability of siwɬkʷ in our territory, working in collaboration with stakeholders and governments at every level. This work confirms that the reality in our streams, wetlands, and groundwater is not being captured in the limited metrics now being used by the Province to define drought levels.[2]

At the local level, our Nation has spearheaded the development of the historic Okanagan Similkameen Collaborative Leadership Table bringing elected leaders from our Nation together with 17 local governments, all committed to working together on shared water challenges. As stewards of our communities and lands, we recognize the importance of evolving our relationships and moving forward in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration.

It is for this purpose the ONA is respectfully requesting an urgent meeting with yourself and Deputy Minister Lori Halls to explore how we can work together more effectively on drought planning and response in the Okanagan and Similkameen where present conditions have the potential to create serious immediate and long-term consequences. Please have your office contact Pauline Terbasket, Executive Director at (250) 707-0095 or by email at director@syilx.org at your earliest convenience to arrange this important meeting.

We trust that you share our commitment to fostering a collaborative and effective relationship in exercising our shared stewardship of siwɬkʷ. We look forward to hearing from you and discussing this important matter.

Sincerely,

OKANAGAN NATION ALLIANCE

ki law na yilmixʷm Clarence Louie
xa?tus, Tribal Chair, Chiefs Executive Council
Syilx Okanagan Nation

cc: Chiefs Executive Council, Okanagan Nation Alliance
Lori Halls, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Water Lands and Resource Stewardship
Natural Resources Committee, Okanagan Nation Alliance

[2] See attached Appendix for an overview of current conditions in our Territory.

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Appendix 1: CURRENT CONDITIONS IN SYILX TERRITORY

The Syilx Peoples are deeply concerned about the combined impacts of drought, climate change, cumulative pressures and over-allocated surface and groundwater systems across the territory which threaten ecosystems, communities, food security, and Syilx cultural practices. To address these challenges, the Province must work in true partnership with the Syilx Nation and communities by upholding Syilx Title and Rights, recognize Syilx leadership and authority, knowledge and technical expertise in watershed planning, restoration and governance.

Basin-scale assignment of drought levels does not support effective water management.

A stream watch list was developed for the region to focus attention on catchments at risk of water conflict in the region. Drought levels were set for each of these catchments. This approach was helpful in focusing attention on priority areas with extremely low or no flow such as Bessette Creek, Salmon River, Vaseux Creek and Shuttleworth Creek, among others, but has been discontinued.

The combination of over-allocation and drought routinely results in streamflows below collaboratively developed critical flow thresholds in Okanagan streams.

ONA, Okanagan Basin Water Board, and the Province invested significant effort in developing Environmental Flow Needs (EFNs) and Critical Environmental Flow Thresholds (CEFTs) for multiple species specific to 18 creeks in the Okanagan watershed. Ongoing monitoring of these creeks shows that flows are frequently below EFNs during the late spring to fall and routinely below CEFTs in several streams during summer and fall due to overallocation and/or overuse. Chronic low flows significantly and negatively impact fish populations such as ntytyix, salmon.

The WSC hydrometric stations used to assign the Okanagan drought level are limited to the headwaters and do not represent drought conditions on the valley bottom.

Site-specific data is critical. Conditions in the Okanagan basin vary between catchments, as well as between high and low elevation areas within each catchment. Few Water Survey Canada (WSC) stations appropriately represent unregulated flow conditions in Okanagan streams, particularly at lower elevations. Excluding non-WSC stations, such as those maintained by the ONA, limits the availability of suitable streamflow information needed to support assignment of drought levels.

Cumulative headwater impacts of wildfire, flood and drought together with mining and limited data in the Similkameen inhibits effective water management and degrades water quality.

Landscape-scale stressors and limited information in the Similkameen present challenges to effective drought setting and water management. Development of EFNs and CEFTs for the Similkameen is a priority. Currently, low groundwater levels and flows in the Similkameen River and tributaries are not adequately captured by the current monitoring network. Low flow impacts, including increased water temperature, reduced contaminant dilution, and reduced groundwater recharge, adversely affect surface and groundwater quality with short- and long-term consequences for the tmxʷulaxʷ, the land and the tmixʷ, all living things. The consequences extend to Okanagan salmon populations that rely on cool Similkameen water as a thermal refuge during periods of temperature stress.

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