

STÓ:LŌ TRIBAL COUNCIL

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For Immediate Release

Re: Stó:lō Tribal Council Moves to Protect Rights In Fraser Canyon

The Vice President of the Stó:lō Tribal Council, Tyrone Mc Neil, says that government treaty negotiators must take into account the aboriginal title and rights of the Stó:lō to land, existing reserves, and millennia old fishing sites in the Fraser Canyon before finalizing a treaty with the Yale Indian Band under the BC Treaty Process.

“Government has known all along about the history of the 5 Mile Fishery Reserve. In 1879, Commissioner Gilbert Sproat, of the Joint Indian Reserve Commission, made a solemn promise to the Stó:lō to set aside a reserve known as the 5 Mile Fishery Reserve (a promise not fully kept) for the use and benefit of the Stó:lō. Despite this knowledge, government has plunged headlong in treaty talks with the Yale Indian Band for cash, salmon and land. Regrettably, neither government nor the Yale Band have explained how they plan to reconcile the continuing rights of the Stó:lō in the Canyon with the soon to be Yale treaty”, said McNeil.

According to McNeil, the main idea behind the creation of Canyon reserves in the 19th Century was to protect highly valued fishing sites from encroachment by both road and rail construction and to permit the Stó:lō feed themselves. He says that 130 years have gone by and the Stó:lō still cling tenaciously to their fishing camps, the gravesites of their ancestors and their ancient villages in the Fraser Canyon. And he says the Stó:lō make the annual summer trek to the Canyon to fish and preserve their catch in the traditional way, on dry-racks. McNeil says the Stó:lō persist in practicing their fishing rights both on and off reserve in the Canyon. He says the Stó:lō “have never nor will they ever let either the Indian Act or a lopsided Yale Indian Band treaty get in the way of a good day’s fishing”.

McNeil says that Reserve Commissioner Sproat’s job was to protect the Stó:lō in their fishing sites. Acting for government, he promised to complete the creation of the 5 Mile Fishery Reserve, but failed to do so. A small reserve was set-up and then turned over to the Yale Indian Band. This move fell short of the original promise to the Stó:lō community. Canada owes a duty of loyalty and good faith to act in the interests of the Stó:lō. By not fully completing the 5 Mile Fishery Reserve, Canada did not act honourably in discharging its fiduciary duty to the Stó:lō. And Canada has breached its lawful obligations to the Stó:lō. McNeil says that both the Seabird Island and Chawathil First Nations have filed a Specific Claim for the loss of the 5 Mile Fishery Reserve.

“All Stó:lō bands have the option of filing a Specific Claim to the Canyon reserves”, said McNeil. He pointed out that the Stó:lō interest in the Canyon was confirmed recently when the Justice Department told the Minister of Indian Affairs, Chuck Strahl, that the largest single reserve in the Canyon, Kuthlalth, was lawfully surrendered to the Shxw’ow’hamel First Nation early in the 20th Century. This decision by the Justice Department makes it clear that the Yale Indian Band Council claim to exclusive rights in the Canyon is wrong. He says the Stó:lō Tribal Council is planning a sustained campaign to protect the rights of Stó:lō First Nations in the Canyon.

For more information, please contact Vice-President Tyrone McNeil at: 1 604-798-1509.