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For Immediate release

Prime Minister Harper's Comments Could Lead to Violence and Broken Deals

The leaders of the largest Aboriginal fishing community on the Fraser River are dismayed by a letter from Prime Minister Stephen Harper to a Calgary newspaper. In his letter, the Prime Minister says a judicial inquiry into problems in the Fraser River Sockeye fishery will go ahead and that his government is opposed to racially divided fisheries programs. "His comments are disturbing because they may give some commercial fishermen the idea that they have the Prime Minister's backing to engage in violence and do things to disrupt fisheries. The Prime Minister needs to clarify his statement before the sockeye fishery gets underway in a couple of weeks. I don't think Mr. Harper wants his comments used by anyone as reason to threaten public safety", said Grand Chief Doug Kelly of the Sto:lo Tribal Council (STC).

Kelly says that the BC Court of Appeal rejected claims of discrimination by a group of industrial fishermen upset over federal government approved fisheries that allow Indian bands on the Lower Fraser River to sell sockeye taken under agreement with the Department of Fisheries & Oceans (DFO). "What can I say? Commercial fishermen unhappy with the courts verdict will need to go to the Supreme Court of Canada to keep their legal beef alive. That's how things work in Canada", Kelly said.

Grand Chief Kelly says even the Prime Minister must respect both the law and court decisions. He said Aboriginal people and DFO did not force commercial fishermen into the courts. They parked their hopes in the courtroom and lost. We urged them to work with us but they have rejected our offers. The courts ruled that our fisheries are not based on race, but rather on Aboriginal rights and fishing plans approved by DFO. The message from the courts is simple; Skin colour and who gets to fish first are of no consequence. If you fish, did you get an opportunity to catch you share of sockeye runs is what counts. I guess certain commercial fishing groups are shopping around the Prime Minister's Office for better than an even break. These groups should take a lesson from the Commercial Salmon Advisory (CSAB). We are working on a plan with the CSAB to both conserve and properly manage salmon fisheries on the Fraser River", said Kelly.

Grand Chief Ron John, an elder and the head of fisheries for the STC says that Prime Minister Harper's letter is also at odds with decisions already made by his own Fisheries Minister. Some 29 Indian bands on the Lower Fraser River are considering offers made by the Fisheries Minister that will give the green light to the sale of fish. The deadline to ink the formal offers is this coming Friday. Grand Chief John wonders if the Prime Minister is planning to overrule his Fisheries Minister and withdraw those offers. "I guess we will know by Friday", said John.

For more information, please contact Grand Chief Doug Kelly at 604-798-1436 or Grand Chief Ron John at 604-798-2435 or STC Policy Adviser Ernie Crey at 604-798-4435.

