



MEDIA RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 27, 2020

**T̂silhqot'in Nation Maintains Full Closure of Steelhead Fisheries,  
Calls on DFO to Take Immediate Action Against Extirpation**

**Williams Lake, BC** (March 27, 2020): Due to the continued immediate threat of extirpation, the T̂silhqot'in National Government (TNG) has re-affirmed its closure of all fishing for the endangered Chilcotin River Steelhead Trout for its members.

The harvest of Chilcotin River Steelhead has traditionally been critical to members of the T̂silhqot'in Nation, taking place at a time of year when other food sources have been in low supply. The population of this iconic fish has drastically declined over the past five years, forcing the T̂silhqot'in Nation to forgo their collective Aboriginal right to fish Steelhead. The steelhead population has declined 81% in just 3 generations, with only 58 adults returned in 2018. In 2019 only 77 adults returned and the estimated return for 2020 is an alarming 48 adult fish

After an Emergency Assessment in 2018, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) assessed the Chilcotin River Steelhead Trout as "Endangered" and recommended an Emergency Order under the *Species at Risk Act*. The COSEWIC panel identified two major causes of decline – a) Ocean conditions and b) Bycatch from commercial fisheries.

The federal Ministry of Environment decided *not* to list Steelhead as a Species-at-Risk in the summer of 2019, and instead pointed to an agreement between Canada and British Columbia which excluded the T̂silhqot'in and failed to honour the *Nation-to-Nation* commitment made by the Prime Minister to the T̂silhqot'in Nation. Meanwhile, by-catch of steelhead continues under DFO's watch and the species faces the imminent threat of extirpation.

In response to the dire numbers, TNG continues to call on the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) to eliminate all bycatch from the commercial Pacific salmon fisheries and to enter into an agreement with the T̂silhqot'in Nation to develop a recovery plan. The continued mismanagement of the Chilcotin River Steelhead Trout must stop or we will lose this iconic stock, and witness an unjustified infringement of an Aboriginal Right.

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The continued mismanagement of Chilcotin River Steelhead as well as other critical fisheries on which the Tsilhqot'in and many others depend, such as sockeye and Chinook, have threatened Tsilhqot'in food security. These threats, compounded by the Big Bar slide, resulted in TNG's declaration of a local state of emergency in 2019. The Tsilhqot'in have chosen to close steelhead fisheries, and call for the same level of urgent and effective action from DFO.

## Quotes:

### **Nits'il?in (Chief) Joe Alphonse, Tribal Chair, Tsilhqot'in National Government:**

"We are tired of doing our part – of continuing to keep our traditional fisheries closed – when other governments are failing to act. It is unfair and unconstitutional that the Tsilhqot'in people sacrifice our fishing rights year after year while BC and Canada fail to address this crisis. My support for the closure this year is conditional – it is conditional on a meeting by phone, asap, with BC and Canada senior officials to hear their commitment to take the action needed to protect and recover our Steelhead from extirpation. There is no time to waste. It's clear to us that without the Tsilhqot'in at the table, the Federal and Provincial governments will let steelhead and salmon populations decline until our Aboriginal rights are extinguished. These populations spawn in Tsilhqot'in title lands and we have fought and sacrificed to keep this habitat pristine and healthy – and meanwhile others outside our territory are fishing these populations into extinction for profit. We expect compensation for these losses and we expect immediate action to protect and recover these fisheries."

### **Nits'il?in (Chief) Jimmy Lulua, Xenigwet'in First Nation Government:**

"It's frustrating that we are still in a position of not knowing whether our fish will return. We haven't seen any plans, let alone any on-the-ground improvements taking place. We need to see meaningful action from the government on this. As caretakers of the land, the Tsilhqot'in remain committed to preserve our natural environment and fisheries. We will do what's necessary to recover our steelhead fishery, but the government needs to engage and do something. The Tsilhqot'in can't save the steelhead on our own. The Tsilhqot'in need to be involved to ensure that actions are being taken to conserve these fisheries because it is clear that government is not making it a priority."

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FACTS from 2018 [COSEWIC Report](#):

- COSEWIC conducted an Emergency Assessment of The Chilcotin River Steelhead Trout on January 10, 2018
- In 2018, there were 58 confirmed Chilcotin River Steelhead Trout –an 81% decline over 18 years.
- The estimated mortality rate from all bycatch in commercial fisheries is in the range of 15-25% annually.
- The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans will be making a decision in the coming weeks about whether steelhead bycatch will be allowed, through the approval of DFO's Integrated Fisheries Management Plan.
- The Thompson River Steelhead are also facing severe declines and were included in the COSEWIC Emergency Assessment.

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