



FIRST NATIONS  
FISHERIES COUNCIL

# Statement of Solidarity on First Nations Freshwater Governance for Fish and Aquatic Ecosystems

Endorsed at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual General Assembly of the  
First Nations Fisheries Council of British Columbia in November 2017

---

## **PURPOSE:**

This Statement of Solidarity is based on input received from the BC First Nations Water Network and the need for a more collective and coherent working relationship amongst First Nations in British Columbia (BC) and the First Nations Fisheries Council of BC (FNFC) to advance positions and perspectives of common interest in freshwater policy, governance and management to protect fish and aquatic ecosystems.

This Statement of Solidarity is not intended to define or extinguish any constitutionally protected Aboriginal or Treaty Rights. It does not and is not intended to displace any legal duty that the Crown may have to consult directly with First Nations.

## **PREAMBLE:**

Water is a connecting force for healthy watersheds, fisheries and communities and First Nations have intimate relationships and inherent responsibilities with their lands, waters and resources. In BC, there are many demands on the freshwater resources, not the least of which is fish and their habitats, and First Nations have a wide range of rights, interests and concerns about water uses and management within their traditional territories. These include the need to protect salmon, freshwater fisheries, aquatic habitats, and groundwater to maintain watershed ecosystem functions, and to protect and conserve water sources. There is growing concern that current and future land and water management decisions and regulatory changes by Crown governments have the potential to impact fish and fish habitats, and may in turn infringe upon First Nations' fisheries rights. The involvement of First Nations in water governance and management is therefore essential.

Through the *BC First Nations Fisheries Action Plan*, BC First Nations have directed the FNFC to support, protect, reconcile, and advance Aboriginal and Treaty Rights as they relate to fisheries and the health and protection of aquatic resources. The priorities of the FNFC are to develop effective governance mechanisms, form collaborative relationships among First Nations organizations, and work together to build a cohesive voice on fisheries matters.

The FNFC launched the "*Water for Fish*" initiative in 2012 to advance objectives outlined in the *BC First Nations Fisheries Action Plan* under the theme of Safeguarding Habitat and Responding to Threats. It was created to support First Nations engagement in water governance processes in BC and facilitate First Nations participation in promoting effective freshwater management practices in their traditional

territories. At its core, *Water for Fish* activities are designed to protect water for fish and healthy aquatic ecosystems.

During the first phase of the *Water for Fish* initiative (2012-2017), the Water for Fish framework was developed to support First Nations and the First Nations Water Network has grown to include over 250 participants from across BC. It is now important to have a formal Statement of Solidarity with agreed upon principles and a clear scope for First Nations to work together and provide coherent and cohesive advice and direction to the FNFC and the First Nations Leadership Council for advancement at provincial and national levels.

#### **PRINCIPLES:**

- First Nations in BC have constitutionally protected Aboriginal Rights that have been affirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada, international conventions, and local and international treaties, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP);
- Water is alive and the lifeblood of our territories that connects everything spiritually, culturally, socially and economically. It is a sacred offering from the Creator and we are responsible for its protection for current and future generations using our traditional knowledge, laws and governance systems within our respective territories. The preservation of water quality and quantity is crucial to the survival of our Peoples and cultures;
- First Nations are self-governing with inherent rights to traditionally owned, occupied or used lands and waters. We have the right to use, develop and protect our waters, lands and natural resources based on our own strategies and processes (UNDRIP Articles 26, 27, 29 and 32). We are entitled to free, prior and informed consent for all legal and regulatory changes and development activities that have the potential to impact our rights, including those connected to our waters and watersheds. The Crown needs to enable and implement UNDRIP in good faith to acknowledge and uphold Indigenous Peoples' rights to lands, territories and resources (UNDRIP Article 19 and 32);
- First Nations leadership in BC has sanctioned the FNFC with a mandate to implement the *BC First Nations Fisheries Action Plan*, and to protect Title and Rights, build capacity, to support First Nations to work together to safeguard freshwater habitats, and help facilitate discussions with the provincial and federal governments regarding the recognition of First Nations' inherent rights with respect to the management and governance of fisheries and aquatic resources, including fresh waters; and,
- As per the First Nations All Chiefs Task Force recommendation in December 2010, the foremost priority for the FNFC is to coordinate BC First Nations' political and technical capacity and develop a cohesive and united voice among BC First Nations as it pertains to fisheries, fish habitat and aquatic resources. In response, the FNFC continues to work to develop collaboration frameworks at a provincial scale and better understand the interests and concerns of First Nations in order to articulate and message positions that are widely supported by First Nations in BC.

## **STATEMENT OF SOLIDARITY:**

The First Nation delegates and Chiefs in Assembly at the First Nations Fisheries Council Annual General Assembly 2017 call upon the FNFC to execute the principle statements outlined in this Statement of Solidarity, and advocate for the engagement of First Nations at the Nation and community level in the management and governance of fresh waters in BC:

- A. We acknowledge and respect the sovereignty of each First Nation; commit to collectively work towards increasing First Nations capacity, decision-making and control in the governance and management of freshwater for fish and aquatic ecosystems in our ancestral territories;
- B. We commit to collaborating on common freshwater-related management and governance issues and goals by engaging in discussions and advancing unified positions and perspectives to the FNFC and the First Nations Leadership Council that are informed and consensus-based; and,
- C. Our work will be guided by the principle of reciprocal accountability – a shared responsibility to achieve common goals by upholding our commitments and accountabilities, and acknowledging that our actions affect others and contribute to the health and resiliency of interdependent and interconnected ecosystems.