

News Release



Heiltsuk Tribal Council

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Heiltsuk Nation Strongly Supports 'Namgis Application for Judicial Review of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Farmed Salmon Policy

Nation says Canada must keep its promise to transition away from open-net salmon farms by 2025, or face First Nations in court.

BELLA BELLA, BRITISH COLUMBIA (May 15, 2024) – Heiltsuk Nation announced its support today for the 'Namgis First Nation's reactivation of an application for judicial review of Fisheries and Oceans Canada's (DFO) policy on salmon feedlots and the Piscine orthoreovirus (PRV), which infects and kills wild salmon.

DFO's current PRV policy, which was created without meaningful consultation with First Nations, allows fish farm companies to stock their feedlots without testing fish.

With an announcement expected shortly from DFO on transition plans for salmon farms in BC, Heiltsuk is warning that anything less than a transition away from open-net farms in 2025 - as promised in government mandate letters - will kill wild salmon and irreversibly harm Indigenous rights and culture across BC.

"Wild salmon are the lifeblood of First Nations across BC," said Marilyn Slett, elected Chief of the Heiltsuk Nation. "Nothing can replace what they mean to our people. We strongly support the 'Namgis First Nation as they reactivate their litigation to protect the rights of all First Nations, and all British Columbians, to use our sea resources for cultural, spiritual, food, and economic purposes. Failure to conserve and protect wild salmon is not an option."

Heiltsuk has participated in each phase of DFO's consultation process on transition planning for open-net farms and has noticed a potential shift in intention from getting pens out of the water, to simply adjusting regulations and maintaining the status quo. This would violate the department's mandate, as would the continuation of its PRV policy.

The types of salmon feedlot projects that have been referred to First Nations recently for review are also raising alarm bells, with applications to increase the tenure and size of farms, and to continue using pesticides to try and manage the sea lice that are killing wild salmon.

"We stand in solidarity with the 'Namgis and thank them for their leadership as we fight to ensure a healthy marine environment and sustainable economy that allows us all to thrive as Marine People," said Hemas Harvey Humchitt, a Hereditary Chief of the Heiltsuk Nation. "We expect Canada and DFO to work with us to turn things around, and to keep the promise to transition away from open-net farms, otherwise they should expect to see us all in court."

The majority of British Columbians, more than 120 First Nations, and many sectors of the economy that depend on wild salmon all agree it's time to transition away from open-net salmon farms. Wild salmon are on the brink. If there isn't meaningful protection of what remains, then existing runs may go extinct, and with them, the food security, economic, social and cultural benefits they provide to all, and which First Nations have relied upon since time immemorial.

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