



## **GITXSAN LEADERS CONTINUE THE FIGHT FOR JURISDICTION OVER TRADITIONAL LANDS, AS PART OF GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE**

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

HAZELTON/GITXSAN, BC – FEB 27, 2020 – While the Prime Minister is calling for the end of the blockades in support of the Wet'suwet'en for the resumption of the transport of goods along rail and roadways - blockade or no blockade - Gitksan leaders will continue in their stand to govern themselves like they have always done prior to colonization. A group of hereditary chiefs is moving forward proactively to manage a looming crisis for the Gitksan nation with a fishing ban for 2020, as part of their nation's governance initiative that is years in the making.

“The outcome of the removal of blockades is no surprise to the Gitksan. This is not defeat, nor is it the last time we will stand together like this. Our leaders have spent nearly a century striving for a better and more equitable life for our people, and the recent movement by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to side with industry confirms there is still a lot of work to do yet,” said says Chief Brian Williams, “Gwiiyeehl”

The Gitksan hereditary chiefs (48 of the 65 wilps) have been working together on implementing the Wilp Government. Central to their work has been to implement the Ayook (the traditional laws) to manage the trespassing and the fish crisis that has deeply affected the Gitksan people. Sports fisherman are breaking Gitksan law by “catch and releasing” as that is considered playing with fish and Gitksan law enforces strict rules around no playing with fish.

In recent years, the Skeena River and its tributaries has been hard hit by low stocks, worsened by unfettered access to the river fishing the recreational fishing industry. Access to the river is something that the Gitksan Ayook (traditional laws) looks on with sacred, deeply held importance. Even within the nation itself, members cannot trespass onto another Wilp's (house groups) fishing hole. Under the prevailing system, outsiders can access the river and take all the fish they want with a license issued by the colonialist government, which is both a lack of respect and a practical concern for the Gitksan.

Since 2018, fishing bans have been in place by First Nations along the Skeena River. Chiefs have been attempting to work collaboratively with both provincial and federal governments; however, the process has been stymied by the same deflection by government representatives as was demonstrated by Prime Minister Trudeau this week.

The Gitksan Chiefs that form part of the Crisis Management Team ask for a number of items to be addressed:

First, Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (FLNRO) issues fishing permits and licenses which do not allow these permit holders the right to use the areas where Gitxsan Annats (traditional fishing holes) are located without seeking proper permission, and no exceptions are entertained during a fish closure we have initiated, regardless of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' (DFO) position. We need to collaborate with all the stakeholders so if a fish ban is in place by the Gitxsan, we need it to translate to actionable enforcement by all the stakeholders such as FLNRO and DFO and our jurisdiction needs to be respected.

Second, we don't rely on Tye Test Fisheries to close fishing to the public and permit holders- we know our fish are in crisis and we require more meaningful participation from BC and Canada during our Crisis Management Meetings. Simply coming to the table is not enough.

Lastly, Special Forces deployed to deal with Indigenous land issues is unwarranted. Prime Minister Trudeau has promoted truth and reconciliation on his agenda and many changes have taken place and we required those efforts to continue. We understand Canada's economy is at stake and moving forward with injunctions in the hopes to push forward on economic benefits is important, but First Nation's future lands are at a higher risk and this was an opportunity to show industry the importance of First Nation collaboration with Hereditary Chiefs and how the lack of understanding on traditional Indigenous government can play a role.

We ask both governments to assign proper levels of authority and to bring the right decision makers to the table. The Gitxsan come to the table with the proper authorities in place, we ask BC and Canada to do the same. We know they are faced with internal challenges and they are working on it, but we need them to find solutions quickly so blockades, rallies and protests don't continue.

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## ABOUT THE GITXSAN

The diverse Gitxsan Nation, in Northern BC, is made up of four clans and House Groups called Huwilp led by Simgiigyet who hold the governance authority (Daxgyet). The traditional society is governed by a system of laws (Ayook) and oral histories (Adaakw), all carried out in feast hall (Lilliget). The Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en people made history and headlines in 1997 when, on appeal, together they sought the first comprehensive account of Aboriginal rights and title in Canada in the Delgamuukw court decision. The Gitxsan Nation covers 33,000 sq. km in Northwest BC; it is estimated that there are 14,000 people of Gitxsan heritage throughout the world.

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