



# Cowichan Tribes



***Ist' hwialasmut tu Xwulqw'selu Sta'lo' – We are taking care of the Koksilah River***  
**COWICHAN TRIBES & PROVINCE SIGN HISTORIC AGREEMENT MARKING LAUNCH OF**  
**XWULQW'SELU (KOKSILAH) WATERSHED PLANNING**

May 12, 2023

Duncan, B.C., Quw'utsun territory – Cowichan Tribes First Nation and the Province of British Columbia are celebrating the signing of a precedent-setting Agreement (*S-xats-thut tst*). The Xwulqw'selu Watershed Planning Agreement builds on three years of government-to-government work by Cowichan Tribes and the Province.

Today's signing marks the launch of the next phase: a comprehensive process to develop a long-term plan for the Xwulqw'selu (Koksilah) Watershed, located within the Quw'utsun (Cowichan) watershed on eastern Vancouver Island. This will be the province's first Water Sustainability Plan developed under the *Water Sustainability Act*, and will address the 'whole of watershed' needs – those of the flora, fauna, land, and the communities that depend on the watershed – in the development of long-term water solutions.

Cowichan Tribes and the Province agree to jointly lead the planning process and approach decisions as equal authorities with distinct legal traditions and responsibilities. The Agreement is informed by 11 Quw'utsun snuw'uy'ulh (teachings) and ensures that local Indigenous values guide the process and provide a foundation for an enduring and respectful co-governance relationship. For example, *Nutsamat kws yaay'us tth qa' – We come together as a whole to work together to be stronger as partners for the watershed.*

The Xwulqw'selu Watershed features prominently in Quw'utsun origin stories and is central to the culture and identity of Quw'utsun Mustimuhw (Cowichan people). It supports multiple species of fish, vital ecosystems, Indigenous and local food security, and sustains the diverse livelihoods of residents and businesses. In recent years, the Watershed has experienced serious climate related challenges, including extreme low flows in the summer and flooding in the winter.

“The Xwulqw'selu watershed is under pressure and we know the current path is not sustainable - for fish, for the ecosystem, or for people. We need to come together to develop a plan that protects the watershed's health and sustains Cowichan Tribes and the Cowichan Valley communities for generations to come,” said **Chief Lydia Hwitsum**. “This plan is the first of its kind and signals a commitment to work

together in an enduring partnership based on respect and recognition of Cowichan Tribes' inherent authority and our teachings," added Hwitsum.

"Healthy watersheds are at the heart of all social, environmental, and economic systems supporting B.C. The Province and Cowichan Tribes share a responsibility to protect the Xwulqw'selu Watershed," said **Nathan Cullen, Minister of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship**. "Through this landmark agreement, we will continue to work together to make shared decisions on the watershed and ensure it is sustainably managed now, and into the future."

Cowichan Tribes and the Province are committed to early, transparent, and ongoing engagement with Cowichan Tribes citizens, local residents, and the wider community, as well as water and land users - starting in the coming months. They look forward to working together to share knowledge, undertake research, and propose solutions for a sustainable future for the Xwulqw'selu Watershed and the people, animals, and plants that depend on it.

### **Additional Quotes**

#### **Hon. Pam Alexis, Minister of Agriculture and Food**

"Protecting the Xwulqw'selu Watershed is vital to Indigenous and local food security now and for future generations. It is also important that we support local farmers and strengthen the community's agricultural economy. By working in partnership with the Cowichan Tribes, we will chart a path that leads to sustainable water use and a resilient food supply, as well as the protection and restoration of fish populations and local ecosystems that rely on the watershed."

#### **Hon. Bruce Ralston, Minister of Forests**

"This historic agreement will lead the way for building a long-term plan for the Xwulqw'selu (Koksilah) Watershed in full partnership of the Cowichan Tribes who are the traditional stewards of this land, and whose knowledge will inform and guide the process. Agreements like this one are an important step to realizing our commitments under the Declaration Act and vision for inclusive and sustainable natural resource stewardship with First Nations as full partners."

### **Media Contacts**

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## Links

Xwulqw'selu Watershed Planning Agreement:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/natural-resource-stewardship/consulting-with-first-nations/first-nations-negotiations/first-nations-a-z-listing/cowichan-tribes>

Initiative Website: <https://www.koksilahwater.ca>

## Background

- In August 2019 and August 2021 due to extreme drought conditions in the Xwulqw'selu watershed, Ministerial Orders under the *Water Sustainability Act* were issued to specific water users (including surface and groundwater licensees, and unlicensed groundwater users) to stop using water, in an effort to help protect fish populations.
- Cowichan Tribes and the Province have been working together in an ongoing government-to-government partnership on the Xwulqw'selu Watershed since February 2020, when they signed an Interim Letter of Agreement.
- As part of the Scoping Process, Cowichan Tribes and the Province undertook initial technical studies, external community engagement, and internal Cowichan Tribes outreach to begin to understand the issues, concerns, and options in the Watershed. The outcome of this work was the recommendation to pursue a Water Sustainability Plan.
- The Water Sustainability Plan that will be completed under this Agreement is the first to be initiated in BC since the *Water Sustainability Act* came into force in 2016.
- In the Agreement, the Parties identify the following core priorities for the Xwulqw'selu Watershed and the Watershed Plan:
  - a) protection and restoration of ecological communities;
  - b) sustainability of environmental flows and water extraction;
  - c) protection and restoration of fish populations;
  - d) protection of cultural resources and Cowichan Tribes' ways of being;
  - e) protection of Cowichan Tribes' Title and Rights and Indigenous rights recognized in UNDRIP;
  - f) supporting the well-being of Cowichan Tribes members and the Xwulqw'selu Watershed;
  - g) supporting the well-being of other groups and communities who use and rely on the Xwulqw'selu Watershed; and
  - h) Indigenous and local food security.
- The Agreement includes the following Cowichan Tribes' *snuw'uy'ulh* (teachings) and *syuw'entst* (proper ways of being) to guide the relationship and development and implementation of the Watershed Plan:
  - *Nuts'amat kws yaay'us 'utu qa'* – We come together as a whole to work together to be stronger as partners for the watershed.
  - *Hwialasmut tu Tumuhw* – Take care of the Earth (this includes the watershed).

- *Mukw' stem 'i 'utunu Tumuhw, 'o' huliitun tst, mukw' stem 'i 'utunu Tumuhw 'o' shiilhukw 'tul.* – Everything on this Earth is what sustains us; everything on this Earth is connected together.
- *Stl'atl'um stuhw tun kwunmun* – Take only what you need.
- *Stsielhstuhw tu mukw stem ('i 'u tuna Tumuhw)* – Respect for all things; Respect for all beings, Respect for what is around you.
- *'Uw-wu ha'kwush 'uhw, 'i 'o' shtes ch 'ul'* – Leave it the way we found it.
- *Hulitun ts-t tu qa'* – Water is life.
- *Stsielh stum tu Sqwutsun'a'lh sh-ayy' 'i' tu sniw's kwa 'e' 'luhwutss* – Cowichan rights and laws are respected.
- *Yaay'usme't kws mukwe' stem 'itunnu Tumuhw 'o' sul'iq'tul, 'Uw-wute'kw'u suhiim* – Work to bring everything in our environment into balance.
- *Hiiye'yutul tst'u 'to' mukw' stem 'i 'u tun'a Tumuhw 'i' tu qa'* – Everything in the natural world is connected as part of our family; we are all relatives.
- *Ts'i'ts'uwatul' eluhwut tu Xwulqw'selu qa' Tumuhw, 'i' Mukw'stem 'ukw'o' yath* – Work together for the health and wellbeing of the Xwulqw'selu Watershed from generation to generation.