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Coast Tsimshian Call on the B.C. Government to Tell British Columbians to Stay Home

Additional Measures Needed as Recreational Fishing Season Starts; Leaders Consider Information Checkpoint

PRINCE RUPERT, B.C./COAST TSIMSHIAN TERRITORY, May 14, 2020 – Today Lax Kw'alaams Mayor Garry Reece and Metlakatla Chief Harold Leighton are again calling on Premier John Horgan to prioritize First Nations health and meet with them to discuss banning non-essential travel to isolated regions, in order to lower the risk of spreading COVID-19 in the region.

“The Government of B.C. has simply asked the public to stay local. We want them to tell people they must stay away. We are telling visitors to stay away and may even have to demand it to keep our communities safe,” said Reece. “More isolated First Nations communities such as ours are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of this pandemic—one of many we have suffered through historically—as are the many members of both our nations who now live in Prince Rupert.”

The May long weekend signals both the easing of restrictions next week as the province enters Phase 2 of the B.C. Restart Plan, as well as the start of the recreational fishing season which traditionally draws many visitors from B.C. and Alberta to the region. The Nations are urgently requesting a meeting with Premier Horgan to discuss banning non-essential travel and ask that both the B.C. and Alberta governments take a more active role in educating the public of the risks recreational visits pose to First Nations communities during COVID-19. The leaders are also asking that:

- When issuing freshwater fishing licences, that the Government of B.C. provide information telling people to stay local and not travel to other regions to fish. Licences should not be issued to people outside of the region.
- The Province assist the Nations in asking the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans not to issue saltwater fishing licences for the region to people living outside of the region.
- Government consider providing additional health care resources to ensure that both the local hospital and the region are better equipped to manage potential COVID-19 cases.

“As leaders, we cannot not stand by as our people are exposed to the risks of COVID-19 coming into the community through non-essential travel,” said Leighton. “We encourage Premier Horgan to respond to our meeting requests and work collaboratively with us on solutions to help keep our community safe from COVID-19.”

“To protect our community, we are considering setting up an information checkpoint on Lax Kw'alaams reserve on Highway 16 as early as next week,” said Reece. “Our goal would be to educate people on why they need to stay in their own communities rather than entering Prince Rupert area unless absolutely necessary. Later, if needed, we may also set up a blockade of non-essential travel.”

The location of any information checkpoint or blockade to non-essential travel would be along Highway 16 on Lax Kw'alaams's IR 26 Reserve, on the Prince Rupert side of Kasiks, roughly 60 kilometres west of Terrace at Salvus. The Nations are not looking to restrict the movement of residents of the Northwest or impact the movement of goods or economic activity.

The Lax Kw'alaams and Metlakatla are continuously monitoring and assessing the situation and look forward to welcoming visitors back to their traditional lands when they believe it is safe to do so.

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Lax Kw'alaams Band

Lax Kw'alaams community is located in the northwest coast of B.C., approximately 20km north of Prince Rupert. The Lax Kw'alaams Band are members of the Nine Tribes of the Coast Tsimshian. The name, Lax Kw'alaams, derives from Laxtgu'alaams, which means 'place of the small roses' in Sm'algyax, the language of the Coast Ts'msyen (Tsimshian). For more information visit: laxkwalaams.ca

Metlakatla First Nation

Metlakatla village is located 5km north of Prince Rupert, on an ancient site - occupied for thousands of years. The Metlakatla Band are members of the Nine Tribes of the Coast Tsimshian. Metlakatla means 'saltwater pass' in Sm'algyax, the language of the Coast Ts'msyen (Tsimshian). For more information visit: metlakatla.ca

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