



## Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako and the Nechako First Nations sign MOU to rehabilitate the Nechako River

**For Release – September 29, 2021**  
**Territories of the Nechako First Nations**

Today—building on the February 25, 2021 [resolution](#) from the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako (“Regional District”) on the restoration of the Nechako Watershed, and on the threshold of the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation—the Regional District and the Saik’uz, Stellat’en and Nadleh Whut’en First Nations (“Nechako First Nations”) signed a pioneering [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (“MOU”).

The MOU commits the parties to work together to restore the health of the Nechako River, its affected tributaries and its fish populations, with a particular focus on sturgeon and salmon populations that are on the precipice of extinction. It also calls for more natural flows in the Nechako River, new stewardship projects and a new governance regime to replace the one established in 1987, which excludes the Nechako First Nations and the Regional District and is widely understood to have contributed to the decline of the Nechako River.

By collaborating together—and with Rio Tinto Alcan, the Province of BC, Canada, Cheslatta and other First Nations, and various stakeholders in the watershed—the Nechako First Nations and Regional District are optimistic that solutions can be found for the complex problems facing the Nechako River.

This MOU represents a significant development in the relationship between the Nechako First Nations and non-Indigenous people, and a key step in the path towards reconciliation. The MOU signing was celebrated at a signing ceremony attended by the elected Chiefs of the Nechako First Nations and Directors of the Regional District.

For the full MOU, click [here](#).

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## **Quotes**

### **Gerry Thiessen, RDBN Chairperson and Mayor of Vanderhoof:**

*“Local First Nations and non-Indigenous communities alike have suffered from the impacts of the Nechako water management regime, which has prioritized energy production over a healthy river and fish populations. The people of our region—those who use and depend on the river—deserve a healthy Nechako and a legitimate seat at the table when it comes to water management. We can achieve that goal by continuing to work together collaboratively.”*

### **Priscilla Mueller, elected Chief of Saik'uz First Nation:**

*“The relationship being built with the Regional District is an example of local communities working together for the common good, and it is one of many relationships that need to be developed to overcome the challenges facing the Nechako. We're gaining momentum, and I'm optimistic that by continuing to build these relationships, we will be able to create the conditions for a flourishing Nechako once again.”*

### **Robert Michell, elected Chief of Stellat'en First Nation:**

*“Since time immemorial, the Stellat'en people have lived beside and on the Nechako River. The River was our economic and spiritual lifeblood. It was taken away from us and converted into an industrial canal without any consultation or compensation. We need what was lost to be returned. And when it is—when the River is brought back to health—everyone in the region will stand to benefit.”*

### **Larry Nooski, elected Chief of Nadleh Whut'en:**

*“After the Kenney Dam was built, the water stopped flowing the way it always had. I remember the heartbreak for our Elders. I could see and I could feel the hurt they felt while walking on the bed of the Nechako River, as they realized that the construction of the Kenney Dam spelled the end of a great river. We owe it to them to restore the health of the River. It's a difficult issue, but we're making real progress—and this MOU is an example of that.”*

## **Backgrounder**

Historically, the Nechako River was one of the largest tributaries of the Fraser River. It was the breeding ground for the Nechako white sturgeon and contributed significantly to highly valued salmon populations.

The headwaters of the Nechako River lie within the Nechako Reservoir, an enormous body of water created by the construction of the Kenney Dam to provide hydroelectric power to an aluminium smelter in Kitimat. Completion of the Dam in the 1950s fundamentally altered the flow patterns of the Nechako River. Most of the water that would have otherwise flowed down the Nechako River has been diverted west, through the mountains to produce hydroelectric power for the smelter. From 1985-2018, the average flow in the Upper Nechako River is estimated to have been just ~36% of the natural flow prior to the construction of the Dam. Further, the 11 kilometers immediately below the Dam have been dry since construction.

The reduction in the natural flow has significantly affected the River's fish populations and habitat. The Nechako white sturgeon has been suffering from "chronic recruitment failure" since at least 1980 and is on the precipice of extinction. The lack of spring freshet and the dewatering of the floodplain and side channels are impairing chinook salmon productivity and recruitment. Migrating sockeye salmon in the Nechako River encounter artificially warm water temperatures that are affecting pre-spawn mortality.

The Nechako River is of spiritual significance and cultural importance to the Nechako First Nations, whose members are descendants of the Indigenous inhabitants who lived along and relied upon the Nechako River since time immemorial. The Kenney Dam has fundamentally altered the Nechako River and interfered with the Nechako First Nations' Aboriginal title and rights. The on-going, unjustified infringements of the Nechako First Nations' Aboriginal title and rights are inconsistent with the principles in the recent legislation passed by the BC Legislature to implement the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

In 2011, Saik'uz and Stellat'en commenced an action against Rio Tinto in the Supreme Court of British Columbia to obtain a court order to restore the natural flow to the Nechako River. The trial, which commenced in October 2019, was completed in spring of this year. The parties are now awaiting a decision.

Current operation of the Kenney Dam and Nechako Reservoir are incompatible with reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the Nechako region. The Regional District stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the Nechako First Nations in opposition to the continued degradation of the Nechako watershed and in the hope for a meaningful role in the management of a new, more natural flow regime.



The Nechako River at Cheslatta Falls (left) in May 2021. Right: The Upper Nechako River, where flow is virtually eliminated due to the Kenney Dam.

Source: Nechako First Nations



Map of the Nechako Reservoir, Nechako River, Nautley River, and surrounding area.

Source: Nechako Environmental Enhancement Fund (<https://www.neef.ca/about/about-2>).