Sumas First Nation, Abbotsford and B.C. partner on riverbank restoration

Abbotsford, BC – An agreement to be signed this week between Sumas First Nation, Abbotsford and the province heralds a spirit of reconciliation and cooperation and a commitment to proactively address a challenging flood management issue on the south flank of the Fraser River.

On July 4, Semá:th (Sumas) First Nation will sign a memorandum of understanding with the City of Abbotsford and the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (FLNRORD) that will guide their work for the next five years.

“This is the proactive measure necessary to avoid destruction of fishing sites, to care for our territories and maintain a working relationship with the City of Abbotsford and the Province of B.C. on flood mitigation,” said Semá:th First Nation Chief Dalton Silver.

“Our people have had a historical connection to the Stó:lō (Fraser River), salmon and fishery, which has been integral to our identity since time immemorial. There are limited back eddy fishing sites in our territory today and we must protect what we have left for today and future generations.”

The agreement recognizes a new government-to-government relationship in which all parties are equally involved in making decisions regarding bank stabilization and flood mitigation efforts within the S’ólh Témexw (traditional territory) and the City of Abbotsford city limits.

The MOU comes after a decade of miscommunication and sometimes bumpy relations between Sumas First Nation, the City and the Province over bank stabilization work that damaged traditional fishing sites and fish habitat. After emergency measures went forward in 2014 and in 2016 with little or no consultation, Sumas was preparing for direct action, said Silver.

“However, cooler heads prevailed and we committed to working through the issues in an effort to eliminate emergency based projects that bypass the need for consultation,” Silver said.

“The MOU allows for the parties to collaboratively develop short and long-term plans for bank stabilization and flood mitigation works, including government-to-government protocols for oversight, emergency authorization and implementation of plans.”
The MOU is in accordance with the Semá:th Declaration, which states the Semá:th are Stó:lō people who have inhabited S’ólh Téméxw since time immemorial, and whose Aboriginal rights and title within S’ólh Téméxw are recognized and affirmed by section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982.

The MOU further aligns the Province’s commitment to reconciliation with First Nations, in accordance with the principle of free prior and informed consent outlined in United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

“We’re pleased to enter into a collaborative union with Sumas First Nation and the City of Abbotsford to develop and implement short and long-term plans for bank stabilization and flood mitigation work, including government to government protocols for oversight, emergency authorization,” said Craig Sutherland, FLNRORD Assistant Deputy Minister.

“This MOU formally recognizes reconciliation in action with the Sumas community. Our united efforts will mitigate the potential impacts to fish and fish habitat, to the food, social, ceremonial and economic fisheries; it will protect the cultural heritage features along the Fraser riparian areas, as well as assist us to better understand and avoid cumulative adverse impacts and enhance or create fishing sites,” Sutherland said.

The agreement, founded on good faith, trust, and respect for the land and each other, will lead to greater efficiency in coordination and communication between governments, and enhance responsiveness to emergency and non-emergency works in the Ridgedale area at the Fraser River.

“The City of Abbotsford is proud to be a partner in this Memorandum of Understanding that will see our three governments all working together collaboratively to address flood management for the Fraser River. This agreement is founded upon the principle of meaningful and respectful relationships that will guide us going forward,” said Abbotsford Mayor Henry Braun.

Dignitaries from the three levels of government and invited guests will take part in a formal signing ceremony of the memorandum of understanding on July 4, 10:30 a.m., at Sumas First Nation.
Media Contacts:

Chief Dalton Silver, Semá:th First Nation,
T: 604-751-0947  E: Dalton.Silver@sumasfirstnation.com

Alex Mitchell, Public Affairs Officer, City of Abbotsford,
T: 604-751-3092  E: amitchell@abbotsford.ca

Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development
Media Relations  T: 250-356-7506