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## About Us

The Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission (NWIFC) is a support service organization for 20 treaty Indian tribes in western Washington. Headquartered in Olympia, the NWIFC employs approximately 65 people with satellite offices in Mount Vernon and Forks.

The NWIFC was created following the U.S. v. Washington ruling (Boldt Decision) that re-affirmed the tribes' treaty-reserved fishing rights and established them as natural resources co-managers with the State of Washington. The commission is composed of representatives from each member tribe who elect a chair, vice chair and treasurer. Commissioners provide direction to the NWIFC executive director, who in turn implements that direction.

The role of the NWIFC is to assist member tribes in their role as natural resources co-managers. The commission provides direct services to tribes in areas such as biometrics, fish health and salmon management to achieve an economy of scale that makes more efficient use of limited federal funding. The NWIFC also provides a forum for tribes to address shared natural resources management issues and enables the tribes to speak with a unified voice in Washington, D.C.

## Historical Background

Indian tribes have always inhabited the watersheds of western Washington, their cultures based on harvesting fish, wildlife, and other natural resources in the region. In the mid-1850s, when the United States government wanted to make Washington a state, a series of treaties were negotiated with tribes in the region. Through the treaties, the tribes gave up most of their land, but also reserved certain rights to protect their way of life:

*"The right of taking fish and usual and accustomed grounds and stations is further secured to said Indians, in common with all citizens of the United States; and of erecting temporary houses for the purposes of curing; together with the privilege of hunting on open and unclaimed lands. Provided,*

*however, that they shall not take shell-fish from any beds staked or cultivated by citizens.”*

*- Treaty of Point No Point, January 26, 1855*



During the late 1960s and early 1970s, tribal members were arrested and jailed for exercising their treaty reserved rights to harvest salmon.

The promises of the treaties were quickly broken in the decades that followed, however, as the tribes were systematically denied their treaty-protected rights by the State of Washington. The struggle to obtain recognition of those rights climaxed in the “Fish Wars” of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when tribal members were arrested and jailed for fishing in defiance of state law.

In 1974, the tribes won a major victory in *U.S. vs. Washington (Boldt Decision)*, which reaffirmed their treaty-protected fishing rights. The ruling – which has been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court – established the tribes as co-managers of the resource entitled to 50 percent of the harvestable number of salmon returning to Washington waters.

Following the ruling, the tribes created the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission (NWIFC) to assist them in conducting orderly and biologically sound fisheries. More recent federal court rulings upholding treaty-reserved shellfish harvest rights have further expanded the role and responsibilities of the tribes as natural resource managers. Those rulings, combined with the interconnectedness of all natural resources, mean that tribal participation is today necessary in nearly all aspects of natural resource management in the region.

The tribal commitment to wise natural resource management is clearly evident in the preamble to the NWIFC Constitution:

“We, the Indians of the Pacific Northwest, recognize that our fisheries are a basic and important natural resource and of vital concern to the Indians of this state, and that the conservation of this natural resource is dependent upon effective and progressive management. We further believe that by unity of action, we can best accomplish these things, not only for the benefit of our own people but for all of the people of the Pacific Northwest.”

NWIFC member tribes are:

Lummi, Nooksack, Swinomish, Upper Skagit, Sauk-Suiattle, Stillaguamish, Tulalip, Muckleshoot, Puyallup, Nisqually, Squaxin Island, Skokomish, Suquamish, Port Gamble

S'Klallam, Jamestown S'Klallam, Lower Elwha Klallam, Makah, Quileute, Quinault, and Hoh.



A Quileute tribal fisherman tends his net near the mouth of the Quillayute River at La Push

The NWIFC is governed by its member tribes, which appoint commissioners to develop policy to guide the organization. Commissioners elect a chairman, vice-chairman and treasurer. The commission's executive director supervises NWIFC staff in the implementation of the policies and natural resource management activities approved by the commissioners.

Acting as a central coordinating body, the commission also provides a forum for member tribes to jointly address natural resource management issues and enables tribes to speak with a unified voice on issues of mutual concern.

The NWIFC is primarily a support service organization that provides direct services to its member tribes to assist them in their natural resource management efforts. Approximately 70 full-time employees provide services to member tribes through an economy of scale that enables tribes to efficiently use the limited federal funding provided for their natural resource management activities. In addition, the commission provides services to non-member tribes through coordination of several statewide programs.

The NWIFC is headquartered in Olympia, Washington, with satellite offices in Forks, Mount Vernon and Kingston. Four departments comprise the commission: Administration, Fishery Services, Habitat Services and Information and Education Services.

The Administration Division includes the executive director, legislative, fishery and habitat policy analysts, wildlife management program, human resources department, clerical department and accounting department.

Fish and shellfish management programs of member tribes are supported by the Fishery Services Division, which provides technical assistance, coordinating management programs and representing tribal management policies. The division is comprised of the Fishery Management and Planning Division, Quantitative Services Division and Enhancement Services Division.

The Fishery Management and Planning Division provides technical assistance and

coordination to tribes in the development and implementation of annual and long-range fishery plans. Staff also assists tribes in implementation of the U.S./Canada **Pacific Salmon Treaty**, which regulates fisheries on salmon stocks shared by the two countries. Another major task of the division is to coordinate tribal participation in the implementation of efforts to protect seven western Washington salmon stocks that have been listed as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act.

The Quantitative Services Division provides data, quantitative analysis tools and technical consulting to aid tribes in their natural resource management activities. The division also administers the Treaty Indian Catch Monitoring Program, which provides a database of harvest statistics critical for fishery management planning and harvest allocation.

The Enhancement Services Division provides coordination for tribal hatchery program activities, including coded wire tagging and fish health programs. Millions of fish produced annually at tribal salmon hatcheries are tagged to provide migration, survival rate and other information critical to fisheries management. NWIFC fish pathologists diagnose illnesses and treat salmon produced at tribal hatcheries to ensure their overall health.

Technical coordination and policy development assistance to member tribes on issues affecting fish habitat and other environmental issues are provided by the Habitat Services Division. The division coordinates tribal participation in forest management processes and conducts a statewide tribal water quality program, as well as a joint salmon habitat inventory and assessment project with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The public relations arm of the NWIFC is the Information and Education Services Division. The division produces news releases to inform and educate the public about the natural resource management activities of the tribes, and responds to numerous information requests from agencies, organizations and the public. The division also produces a variety of publications, such as the quarterly NWIFC News, as well as videos and educational exhibits.

The scope of participation by treaty Indian tribes in the management of natural resources in western Washington has grown steadily since the U.S. vs. Washington ruling that reaffirmed their treaty reserved rights.

In May 1999, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that reaffirmed the tribes' treaty reserved right to harvest shellfish, establishing the tribes as co-managers of shellfish resources in western Washington. Because tribes also reserved the right to hunt in treaties with the United States government, tribes also have become active participants in the management of deer, elk, and other wildlife resources in the region.

Shellfish and wildlife management programs have been added to the role of the NWIFC in recent years, and the organization will continue to evolve as necessary to aid the tribes in their effort to protect, preserve and enhance the natural resources of this region for future generations.

“The tribes are here to stay as co-managers of the natural resources in western Washington,” says Billy Frank, Jr., NWIFC Chairman. “We are confident that by working together – all of us – we can reach our common goals.”

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