



PRESS RELEASE

CONFEDERATED TRIBES OF THE COLVILLE RESERVATION

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Colville Tribes Files Lawsuit Against United States for Wildfire Damages

(Nespelem, WA)—The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation filed a lawsuit today against the United States seeking damages related to the massive wildfires that burned more than 240,000 acres on the Colville Reservation in 2015. The Tribes alleged that the United States failed to maintain adequate forest health, through measures such as prescribed burning, which led to fires of unprecedented size and intensity.

The North Star and Tunk Block fires began in August 2015 and ultimately burned more than 590 square miles and 800,000,000 board feet of the Tribes' commercial timber over a two-month period. The lost timber represented approximately 20 percent of the commercial timber on the Colville Reservation and remains the largest loss of board feet of timber of any fire event on any Indian reservation in recorded history.

Colville Business Council Chairman Andrew Joseph, Jr., said that apart from the loss of timber, the fires caused long term damage to cultural resources on the Reservation. "Tribal members hunt, fish, and gather food and medicine throughout the Colville Reservation," Joseph said. "In many areas the fires burned so hot that they sterilized the soil and created a moonscape. It will take decades for our resources to completely recover in those areas."

The United States owes a variety of fiduciary duties to the Colville Tribes under Federal law. The lawsuit alleges that the United States breached these duties, including duties to adequately manage fuels and maintain forest health on the Colville Reservation. The Tribes also allege that the United States failed to provide adequate firefighting resources for the Colville Reservation by prioritizing off-reservation, non-trust property over the Tribes' trust forests.

Joseph said the deficiencies in the United States' preparation for and response to the North Star and Tunk Block fires in 2015 have not been addressed and the Colville Tribes remains gravely concerned about ongoing and future wildfires on the Colville Reservation. Two fires that are currently active on the Colville Reservation have destroyed multiple homes and burned more than 60,000 acres.

"We hope this lawsuit will result in the Department of the Interior finally living up to its trust responsibilities to the Colville Tribes," Joseph said.

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About the Colville Tribes:

Today, more than 9,429 descendants of 12 aboriginal tribes of Indians are enrolled in the Confederated Tribes of the Colville. The twelve tribes which compose the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation include: ščə́lám̄xəx^w (deep water) or Chelan; walwáma (Wallowa people) or Chief Joseph Band of Nez Perce; sǰ^wyǰilp (sharp pointed trees) or Colville; šntiyátk^{wəx} (grass in the water) or Entiat; snǰáyckst (speckled fish) or Lakes; mətx^wu (blunt hills around a valley) or Methow; škwáxčənəx^w (people living on the bank) or Moses-Columbia; nspilm (prairie) or Nespelem; uknaqin (seeing over the top) or Okanogan; palúšpam (people from Palouse) or Palus; sənpǰ^wilx (grey mist as far as one can see) or San Poil, and šnpəšq^wáwsəx^w (people in between) or Wenatchi.