



Confederated Tribes and Bands  
of the Yakama Nation

Established by the  
Treaty of June 9, 1855

*For Immediate Release*

## **YAKAMA NATION JOINS THE AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL FRESHWATER CHALLENGE**

### **Yakama Tribal Council Chairman Attends White House Water Summit to Support Clean Drinking Water & Freshwater Habitat Restoration Efforts**

April 23, 2024. WASHINGTON, DC – Today, as part of the White House’s Earth Week, the White House Council on Environmental Quality (“CEQ”) hosted a Water Summit. Yakama Tribal Council Chairman Gerald Lewis spoke at the event, highlighting the Yakama Nation’s efforts to protect and restore fresh water resources and riparian habitats within its traditional territories, and to hold the federal government accountable to its obligations to provide secure, clean water resources to tribal communities.

### **Yakama Nation is an Inaugural Partner in the America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge**

At the Summit, CEQ Chair Brenda Mallory announced the Biden Administration’s new “America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge: A Partnership to Conserve and Restore America’s Rivers, Lakes, Streams, and Wetlands.” The Yakama Nation is one of the 100 inaugural partners to sign onto this challenge, which sets national goals for the protection of freshwater resources. One key goal is reconnecting, restoring, and protecting 100,000 miles of our nations’ rivers and streams by 2030, using approaches like removal of impediments and stream bank restoration.

“The Yakama Nation is glad to come together with other tribal, state, and local governments today to support the important goals of the Biden Administration’s America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge,” said Chairman Lewis. “Protecting our freshwater resources supports the health of our People, our First Foods, and our way of life.” Over the past twenty years, the Yakama Nation Fisheries program has restored or protected nearly 2,000 miles of stream and riparian habitat and 14,000 acres of wetlands; restored fish access to over 200 miles of stream habitat by removing barriers and diversions; and secured over 17,000 acre-feet per year of water through in-stream conservation.

### **Yakama Nation’s Georgeville Arsenic Water Treatment Project Highlighted at Water Summit**

The Summit agenda also addressed the ongoing water and sanitation crisis in Indian Country. Federal studies show that nearly 48% of U.S. homes on Native American land – in contrast to less than 1% of U.S. homes overall – lack access to reliable clean drinking water or basic sanitation services.<sup>i</sup> “The federal government has Treaty obligations and a trust responsibility to Tribes to make sure we have access to water. Our reservation lands cannot function as homelands if we do not have clean, safe water to drink,” Chairman Lewis stated. “Unfortunately, over the last century, federal investments in modern water and sanitation systems have largely bypassed Native American communities.”

In recent years, the Yakama Nation has had to issue ‘do not consume’ notices, and provide bottled water to people in some communities within their territory because of unsafe levels of arsenic in the local water supply. “In Georgeville, [Washington] . . . our people couldn’t drink the tap water for over a year” acknowledged Chairman Lewis. “Fortunately, with funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and in partnership with the federal government, we will be able to build a new water treatment facility for Georgeville.”

In January of this year, a memorandum of agreement was signed between the Yakama Nation and the federal Indian Health Service (IHS) to construct an arsenic treatment system for Georgeville, funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Shortly afterward, discussions began about having the Georgeville Arsenic Treatment Project be the first pilot effort under a new cooperative agreement between IHS and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, to leverage Reclamation's engineering capacity to accelerate IHS's delivery of tribal water projects.

"Having IHS and Reclamation working together, and combining their technical knowledge, will speed up project delivery," stated Chairman Lewis. "This is important, because every day we spend waiting for the Georgeville project to be completed is a day where Yakama families go without a safe drinking water system. A day where our People remain worried about the well-being of their children and elders."

The new inter-agency approach by IHS and the Bureau of Reclamation is intended to help remove barriers and eliminate red tape, which President Biden called for in his recent [executive order](#) on reforming the delivery of federal funding and support for Tribal Nations.

### **Related Regional News: New Agreements Will Advance Bradford Island Clean-Up**

Separately, the Biden Administration, acting through the Army Corps of Engineers, recently signed a Federal Facilities Agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the states of Oregon and Washington for the clean-up of Bradford Island and surrounding waters at the Bonneville Dam. A related MOU was also signed that will make sure the Yakama Nation has a substantive role in working with the states and the two federal agencies as clean-up is undertaken.

During the construction of Bonneville Dam, the United States allowed equipment containing highly contaminated substances to be dumped into the Columbia River. The pollution was so severe that in 2022, the EPA added Bradford Island to the National Priorities List and designated it as a Superfund site. The resident fish in that part of the river have been determined to have the highest levels of toxic PCBs of any location in the United States, resulting in the state of Oregon and Washington issuing fish consumption advisory notices in 2013.

"Cleaning up the land and water at Bradford Island is long overdue, but must be done properly and to the highest standards," said Chairman Lewis, commenting on the new agreements. "We look forward to working with our federal and state partners to ensure that happens."

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*Video Recording of the White House Water Summit:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpvMNVcduuw>

*White House Water Summit Fact Sheet:* <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/23/fact-sheet-at-white-house-water-summit-biden-harris-administration-announces-bold-national-goal-to-protect-and-restore-freshwater-resources-delivers-over-1-billion-for-tribal-clean-water-projects/>

*Full text of the America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge:* <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/America-the-Beautiful-Freshwater-Challenge.pdf>

*List of inaugural signatories to the America the Beautiful Freshwater Challenge:* <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ceq/97632-2/>

*EPA background information on Bradford Island:*

<https://cumulis.epa.gov/supercpad/SiteProfiles/index.cfm?fuseaction=second.Cleanup&id=1002228>

Contact YN Public Information Officer Star Diavolikis at [Star\\_Diavolikis@yakama.com](mailto:Star_Diavolikis@yakama.com) or (509) 830-6698 with press inquiries.

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<sup>i</sup> See e.g. Democratic Staff of the House Committee on Natural Resources. Water Delayed is Water Denied: How Congress Has Blocked Access to Water for Native Families. Washington, DC: House Committee on Natural Resources; 2016. Available at: <https://democrats-naturalresources.house.gov/water-delayed-is-water-denied>.