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For Immediate Release:

OKANAGAN NATION COMMITS TO EXPLORING PARTNERSHIP WITH PARKS CANADA

Okanagan Nation Territory: Representatives of the Okanagan Nation (Syilx) were among the first to respond to the possibility of a national park reserve in the South Okanagan and Similkameen region about a decade ago. The Syilx, original caretakers of the land, see the importance of protecting the land in balance with sustainable growth. A future protected area was envisioned as a potential tool to help support responsible development, and protect ecological and cultural integrity for future generations.

The four South Okanagan Bands (Lower Similkameen, Osoyoos, Upper Similkameen, and Penticton) with the full support of the Okanagan Nation Alliance Chiefs Executive Council are now engaging their communities and seeking a common vision for a Syilx/Parks Canada protected area. For the past year, the bands have been engaged in collaborative discussions with Parks Canada seeking shared understanding and mutual benefit. Current discussions are centred on *Txasqin* (Kobau, Chopaka, Kilpoola) and the Vaseux Lake area.

"At this point in time, the Okanagan Nation Alliance strongly urges both the Governments of Canada and British Columbia to revisit their premature and hasty decision to abandon the South Okanagan Park proposal until full consultations have taken place with the First Nations of the south Okanagan and Similkameen valleys," said Grand Chief Stewart Phillip.

Chief Robert Edward, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, states "Our rights as Syilx people come with responsibilities and obligation to the natural world, just as they always have. Our work with Parks Canada may provide future partnerships and will assist us in determining what will be the best direction for taking care of our lands. The health of our land, community and future generations is of utmost importance. The lands of our ancestors are an issue always worthy of continued discussions.

The Okanagan Nation and Parks Canada have found common interests and concerns, including water, biodiversity, and species at risk, and integrating economic opportunities such as ecotourism with ecological health. "We are optimistic that solutions can be found", said Chief Edward, adding, "We have come a long way from our position of opposition in 2008." The status quo 'business as usual' does not provide the Syilx people or local communities with control or certainty over future development within the South Okanagan. We are exploring all available options including the possibility of establishment of a national park reserve.

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