

“Being Frank”

It Takes More Than Words

By Billy Frank, Jr. Chairman, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

Olympia, WA (May 20, 2005) Governor Gregoire says the state and the tribes have far to go in their government-to-government relationship. We couldn't agree more.

She recently followed the examples of her predecessors in officially endorsing the Centennial Accord, a 1989 state/tribal commitment to work together, as governments, to find mutual solutions to the many challenges we share. The tribes appreciate her words of support because the Accord provides good guidance toward worthwhile achievement.

Still, she would be the first to admit words alone can ring hollow, however inspiring they may be. It will be action, and promises kept, that will measure the success of her administration.

When tribal chairs joined former Governor Booth Gardner in signing the Accord in the state's centennial year, concurrent achievements put the Northwest in the international limelight and inspired cooperation between Indian and non-Indian nations and states near and far. It was follow-up action and promises realized, not the act of signing, that brought luster to the Gardner legacy.

Booth's successors have not cast as large a shadow. When he worked with us to develop the Accord, he understood that we are the "fishing tribes." He knew that is a reputation we have earned, in the eyes of tribes all across the country, through thousands of years of stewardship. He knew working with us means putting the salmon where it belongs, at the forefront of all decisions, involving everything from the economy to education. Strong returns of salmon mean clean waters and protecting uplands. It means pure air and it means healthy people. It means we are in touch with our common mother, the Earth.

The Accord speaks of respect, understanding and cooperative communication. Good words. But they're meaningless unless they lead to more salmon and greater investments in the protection and restoration of salmon habitat. For far too long, most businesses in this state have failed to be responsive to the needs of this Northwest icon and the state has failed to inspire and adequately fund the efforts needed to respond to the needs of salmon.

We have deeply appreciated it when non-tribal people and governments in watersheds across the state have worked with us in our care-taking role as salmon managers. And we deeply appreciate the Governor's embrace of the Centennial Accord. But the fact is that we are tired of sacrificing our fisheries while habitat devastation marches on unscathed and the exploitation of the land continues unabated. The impacts of excess do accumulate, and they do kill fish.

Will the promises of our new governor help bring the change that must come? It will take courage, foresight and tempering of lifestyle. But the opportunity to change does exist, and we do believe she is capable of providing sorely needed leadership. We offer our hand to her, in friendship and the spirit of cooperation.