

BC First Nations groups call for sport fishing ban after shooting

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VANCOUVER, B.C. - The leader of a British Columbia Indian band who was shot in the face with a BB gun during an altercation with a sport fisherman says he's worried the incident might trigger further violence on the water.

Chief Willie Charlie, head of the Chehalis Indian Band, was fishing on the Fraser River near Chilliwack Sunday afternoon when police say his net became entangled with a boat operated by a sport fisherman.

The RCMP said the situation quickly escalated and the sport fisherman pulled out a firearm and shot Charlie in the face. He was treated for a minor laceration and said the gravity of the situation didn't sink in until well after his heart stopped racing.

"A lot of the native fishermen are really upset now with this incident and are threatening that they're not going to take it, they're not going to sit back," Charlie said in an interview Monday.

"There's going to be weapons involved. It has the makings for something really bad."

Charlie says he's asking aboriginal fishermen to let an investigation by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans run its course.

"The situation's only going to get worse if DFO doesn't do something."

A DFO spokesperson wasn't immediately available for comment.

The RCMP says no one has been arrested yet.

Charlie, along with other members of British Columbia's First Nations community, called for a ban on sport fishing in parts of the Fraser River.

"Sport fishers need to respect our limited weekend openings and get along with our fishers or get out of the river," he said. First Nations fishermen in the area are given two, 12-hour openings on the weekend to catch chinook salmon.

Charlie said if sport fishers cannot accommodate First Nations activity, "then First Nations would find it necessary to close the river during their fishing openings to protect themselves."

That message was seconded by Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, president of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs.

"It is abundantly clear that tensions on the Fraser River are rising to dangerous levels," Phillip said.

The number of sockeye salmon returning to the Fraser River this year is drastically lower than originally anticipated. That's resulted in cutbacks for aboriginal, sport and commercial fisheries.

Ernie Crey, spokesman for the Sto:lo Tribal Council, says the council's request that sport fishermen voluntarily leave the Fraser River to help conserve sockeye stocks has grown into an urgent demand.

"The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (should) close the entire Lower Fraser River to all sports fishing," he said.

"I told the DFO that there is imminent danger of violent confrontations between our food fishing families and sport fishermen who don't believe they should share the Fraser with aboriginal people."

Vic Carrao, owner of STS Guiding Service which offers fishing tours along the Fraser River, stressed there is no reason any fisherman should ever resort to violence.

"We hope that that person who did that will be charged and given the proper punishment because that's ridiculous and it's something that we definitely don't condone," he said.

But Carrao said First Nations leaders calling for sport fishing to be banned from the Fraser River is nothing new.

"They're looking for an incident like this. Unfortunately, this individual who did this played right into their hands," he said.

Carrao said there is years of tension between aboriginal and non-aboriginal fishermen, a problem that hasn't been helped by those on the sports side documenting illegal night-time fishing.

"Their number one goal right now is to get us off the river because when you get us off the river they are free to do as they wish," Carrao said.

"If you want to see a removal of sockeye from the river, you remove the sport fishermen from the river and there'll be rampant illegal fishing."

Carrao said sport fishermen were specifically asked to walk away from any altercations with First Nations fishermen. Most have obliged.

Carrao called sport fishing a vital part of B.C.'s economy and said it generates millions of dollars each year while employing hundreds.

He said he's optimistic DFO will be able to help resolve the situation, which has been made worse by loose regulations around driftnet fishing.

"If they could just make a buffer zone and ask First Nations, when you do your drift, stay 100 metres off the shore, there would be no conflict," he said.

"Sports fishermen could fish the inside, the driftnetters could fish the outside, and we'd all be happy and we'd all catch fish and everybody could get along."