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Ma'amtigila Nation opposes application for new fish farm

On Tuesday, chiefs from four Kwakwaka'wakw nations voiced fierce opposition to an application for a new fish farm in the Johnstone Strait, off Vancouver Island. The public meeting was a step towards [Grieg Seafood and Tlowitsis Nation gaining approval for a new large, open-net facility near the entrance to Knight Inlet.](#)

With rain thundering outside, a group of Kwakwaka'wakw community members and leaders gathered in traditional regalia, including button blankets and woven cedar, at the Port McNeil Community Centre. Many had traveled from nearby Alert Bay by boat. Chief Ernest Alfred, hereditary chief and elected councillor of the 'Namgis First Nation, [spoke first.](#)

“We have some strong words for our relatives — to clean up their act and to quit with the greed now,” said Alfred. “This administration has been silencing the people of the Tlowitsis and especially the Ma'amtigila, who you see represented here.”

Pointing to maps showing the proposed fish farm location, Alfred was emphatic: “The Ma'amtigila own this area! They own this area, but it isn't exclusive. You need to understand that this is disputed territory.”

The fish farm application is the [latest expansion of the business partnership between the Tlowitsis Nation and Norwegian aquaculture giant Grieg Seafood.](#) It seeks permission to build a new fish farm operation of five, 200m pens in the waters of [Chatham Channel](#), a move that would reverse [several years of provincial and federal moves to close the destructive industry.](#) This narrow waterway is off the central coast of Vancouver Island and in the middle of the territories of the Kwakwaka'wakw Peoples.

More specifically, it is the territory of the Ma'amtigila Nation, a fact [recognized by the Department of Indian Affairs in 1886](#) and [again in 1914.](#) The territories of the Ma'amtigila have also been recognized, according to potlatch law, by the chiefs of the Kwakwaka'wakw nations, and also [by anthropologists.](#)

In 1945, the Ma'amtigila, weakened by decades of colonial violence and disease, agreed to [amalgamate administratively with the nearby Lowitsis, or Tlowitsis.](#) The DIA agreement clearly stipulated that they would exist as equals, a single band with two chiefs. However, this never occurred and the Ma'amtigila were systematically excluded until being entirely erased.

The Tlowitsis Nation does not hold elections and the community has had the same chief since 1982. Chief John Smith, who took over the position from his brother, also appoints all positions within the Nation. In 1998, as chief of what was then the Tlowitsis-*Mumtagila* First Nation, Smith submitted to the government a band council resolution which declared, “The Mumtagila ceded title and authority to their lands to the chiefs of the Tlowitsis.” It summarily removed *Mumtagila* from the nation's name, and retained claim to all their territory. As of today, the Government of Canada does not recognize the existence of the Ma'amtigila Nation.

Speaking at Tuesday's meeting, Ma'amtigilan Brian Wadhams referred directly to this moment. “At the stroke of a pen! Our tribe was annihilated, by two people. Why did that government allow that to happen?”

It is in these waters that the Tlowitsis leadership is now proposing the construction of a new Atlantic salmon fish farm. Tuesday's meeting, as well as an online meeting earlier in the day, were held in fulfilment of the application process. In

attendance were representatives from the province, the Department of Fisheries & Oceans, as well as Bernie Taekema of resource consulting firm [ennregs](#). Five chiefs from the Kwago'ł, Mamalilikala, Łowitsis, and Ma'ąmtagila nations led a group of thirty community members, who stood in opposition to both the potential environmental impacts of the project and the failure to consider Indigenous legal protocol. Of the sixty people present at the online portion, none spoke in favour of the project.

“You’re talking to the wrong people,” said Andrew Wadhams, one of three Ma'ąmtagila hereditary chiefs and chief of the Tlowitsis Nation. “We come here with respect today, hoping to be heard. We’re not going to go away and we need you guys to do the right thing, so we can sort this out.” He paused, “But there ain’t going to be no fish farm going in there.”

This application follows over a decade of [unremitting opposition](#) to fish farms in the area. This work has produced significant results, such as Ottawa’s recent decision to [block restocking at the most controversial sites in the Discovery Islands](#). In 2019, the federal government vowed to phase out the industry by 2025. However, that promise was [subsequently walked back in 2020](#), and there has been no progress since then. Currently the federal government [has not released a timeline for the promised transition from ocean-based to land-based farming](#).

The frustration in the room on Tuesday was palpable.

“You can’t do this,” said John Powell, elected chief of the Mamalilikula, standing alongside several councilors from his nation. “That territory belongs to us as well. We’ve worked so hard to take these fish farms out of our territories, because of the damage they’ve done. The peripheral damage and the lateral damage is as great as the areas where these farms are in.”

According to law, the application must include an [opportunity for members of the public to submit their feedback](#). The deadline to submit comments is January 13, 2022.

For those in the room on Tuesday, there was no doubt.

“We are never going to go away, us Ma'ąmtagila,” said elder Maxine Matilpi. After speaking at length in Kwakwala, she directed her words to Chief Smith: “I come from my father, chief of the Ma'ąmtagila, ‘Maxwayalidzi. We are never going to go away and we are going to fight for what belongs to us.”

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