

The Reconnection of Chamna: Healing the Yakima River Delta event bridges communities



Yakama Nation Fisheries photo by Michael-David A. Bushman

Yakama Nation leaders and partners gather at Columbia Park West in Richland, WA, on April 24, 2026, to celebrate The Reconnection of Chamna: Healing the Yakima Delta, an event hosted by Yakama Nation Fisheries.

RICHLAND, Wash. — Yakama tribal leaders, agency partners and community members gathered April 24, 2026 at Columbia Park West, in Richland, WA, to celebrate the removal of the Bateman Island causeway and the official reconnection of Chamna (Yakima River delta), a milestone organizers said will restore river function and improve habitat for salmon, steelhead and lamprey.

“Today we can celebrate an ecosystem function being brought back to life—nature is climbing back into the engineer’s seat,” said Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission Senior Advisor, Jaime Pinkham.

The riverside celebration, hosted by Yakama Nation Fisheries with partners, including the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Walla Walla District and the Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group, opened with a traditional Yakama

Nation blessing and drum ceremony to recognize both the reconnection of the river but also the reconnection and reintroduction of the Yakama people to this land.

Speakers at the event emphasized that this work represents more than an engineering achievement; it is a vital cultural and ecological reconnection.

City of Richland Mayor Pro Tem, Shayne VanDyke, noted, “We’re here celebrating a reconnection, not only to the Yakima River and the Columbia, but this whole system and getting it back the way it was.”

The Bateman Island causeway is described as a nearly century-old structure that created warm, stagnant backwater on the west side of the island. Yakama Nation Fisheries biologists have documented elevated summer temperatures and dense populations of warm-water predator fish in that backwater, conditions they say have been linked to high juvenile and adult salmon mortality in recent years. In the summer of 2024, unusually warm conditions contributed to a significant die-off of adult sockeye in the delta, underscoring the urgency of restoration work.

“There are generations of biologists who worked on this long before us,” said Yakama Nation Fisheries Program Manager, Dave Blodgett III. “It is worthwhile to recognize those who laid down the path for this great work.”

Yakama Nation Fisheries staff said long-term monitoring and habitat assessments informed the decision to remove the causeway. Construction crews breached the causeway earlier this year and excavated the underwater portion to reestablish flow around Bateman Island, allowing Columbia River currents to resume a more natural flow that had been altered since the 1940s.

Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife South Central Regional Director (Region 3), Mike Livingston cheered, “I’ve been waiting to say this for a long time: we did it! It takes a team. It takes an army to get this done.”

Lt. Col. Kathryn Werback of the Army Corps of Engineers Walla Walla District said the project marks a turning point for the river. “The removal of the Bateman Island causeway marks a significant milestone. For the first time in decades, the river is flowing more naturally,” she said, noting the Corps led construction under the Continuing Authorities Program with local coordination from state and tribal co-managers.

Biologists and federal partners said reconnecting the channel will improve access to hundreds of miles of spawning and rearing habitat, reduce thermal barriers that previously created lethal summer temperatures for migrating salmon, and lower predation on juvenile fish. Yakama Nation staff have reported backwater temperatures that can range widely, creating conditions lethal to salmon and steelhead and allowing introduced predator species to proliferate.

“This is a long-term collaborative effort,” said Joe Blodgett, Yakama Nation Klickitat Fisheries Program Manager. “Forming that partnership was crucial to getting things accomplished here and it is incredibly rewarding to see the years of collaboration come to fruition.”

NOAA Fisheries leaders echoed that sentiment. “This work never happens with just one entity or one person. It takes a whole community to persevere and get it done,” said Carrie Robinson, Director of NOAA’s Office of Habitat Conservation. She added that the Yakama Nation’s persistence was central to the project’s success: “I don’t think we would be standing here today without their leadership and persistence.”



Yakama Nation Fisheries photo by Michael-David A. Bushman

Yakama Nation Fish & Wildlife Committee Chairman, Jeremy Takala, closed the speaker portion of the Yakama Nation Fisheries celebration event, “The Reconnection of Chamna: Healing the Yakima River Delta”, held April 24, 2026, in Richland, WA.

About 400 people attended the celebration, where tribal elders from both the Yakama Nation and Umatilla offered blessings with agencies emphasizing the connection between ecological recovery, treaty rights and cultural continuity. “We are not fighting for today — we are fighting for tomorrow, for our children and our children’s children,” said Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Chairwoman Kat Brigham.

Yakama Nation leaders also reflected on the cultural significance of restoring flow to a place long altered by development. “This is not just a celebration for us — it’s a celebration for the water and for the fish returning to where they want to be,” said Kyle Shields, Yakama Nation DNR Superintendent Assistant.

Yakama Nation Fisheries and the United States Army Corps of Engineers will continue to monitor water temperature, fish passage, sediment transport and vegetation in coming seasons to

track ecological responses as flows resume. Event organizers said continued outreach and restoration work across the Yakima Basin will build on this milestone.

“There are so many people who have touched this project to make it a success,” said Kat Herzog, United States Army Corps of Engineers Walla Walla District Planner/Project Manager. “And if you’re ever looking for a challenge, join the Corps and work in a project delivery team—because it is not easy. But look at us today.”

Yakama Nation Fish & Wildlife Committee Chairman, Jeremy Takala, closed the speaker portion of the event by saying, “there are always possibilities when we come together, and the fish deserve our support. They deserve much better.”

The event concluded with a salmon bake meal, that was prepared and served by Yakama Nation Fisheries staff.

“I’m grateful for our Yakama Nation Fisheries staff and partners who put this event together,” expressed Yakama Nation Fisheries Program Manager, Dave Blodgett III. “From the planning, to the cooks and serving, to the demonstrations and outreach - their hard work made every detail of this project and celebration possible.”

By Yakama Nation Fisheries Public Relations/Multimedia Specialist, Michael-David A. Bushman.