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Billy Frank Jr., longtime Northwest tribal fishing activist, dies at 83



In this Jan. 13, 2014 file photo, Billy Frank Jr. poses for a photo near Frank's Landing on the Nisqually River in Nisqually, Wash. Frank, a Nisqually tribal elder who was arrested dozens of times while trying to assert his native fishing rights during the Fish Wars of the 1960s and '70s, died Monday, May 5, 2014. He was 83. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)



By [The Associated Press](#)

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SEATTLE -- Billy Frank Jr., the tribal fisherman who led the Northwest "fish wars" that helped restore fishing rights for American Indians four decades ago, died Monday at age 83.

The Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission and the Nisqually Tribe near Olympia confirmed his death. The cause was not immediately known.

"He was a selfless leader who dedicated his life to the long fight for the rights of our state's native people," Gov. Jay Inslee said in a written statement. "Billy was a champion of tribal rights, of the salmon, and the environment. He did that even when it meant putting himself in physical danger or facing jail."

Frank was first arrested for salmon fishing as a boy in 1945 — an event that led him on a long campaign for tribal rights. He and others were repeatedly arrested as they staged "fish ins" demanding the right to fish in their historical waters, as they were guaranteed in treaties when they ceded land to white settlers in the 19th century. Frank was jailed more than 50 times.

The efforts were vindicated in 1974, when U.S. District Judge George Boldt affirmed the tribes' right to half of the fish harvest — and the nation's obligation to honor the old treaties.



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In this file photo from the late 1960s provided by the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, Billy Frank, center, is arrested during a "fish-in" staged near the Washington State Capitol in Olympia, Wash.

AP Photo/Courtesy Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

Over the next 40 years, Frank continued to advocate for tribal fishing rights and protection of natural resources, including salmon.

"Indian Country has suffered a monumental loss in the passing of Billy Frank, Jr.," said Paul Lumley, Executive Director of the **Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission**, in a written statement. "Billy was a staunch advocate for tribal sovereignty and treaty reserved fishing rights as well as the region's salmon

populations."

"His impacts knew no boundaries and were often felt from the streams of the Pacific Northwest to the halls of Washington DC. Billy was a living icon whose legacy will be seen in every fish return, every tribal fishery and every battle for those resources that has yet to be fought."

Only weeks ago, Frank and other tribal members met with federal environmental regulators to push for more stringent water quality standards to reduce the amount of pollution that accumulates in fish. The standards would especially protect native people who eat large amounts of salmon and other fish from Washington state waters.

Merye Hayes, fisheries policy liaison with the Suquamish Tribe, knew Frank for 25 years.

"He's been so inspiring to all the tribes," Hayes said. "He believed in the work that he was doing. He will be missed by the tribal people and people who believe in the resources that he so wanted to protect."



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