



TRIBAL BUSINESS HIGHLIGHTS

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THE MULTIFACETED MISSION OF THE YAKAMA NATION OFFICE OF LEGAL COUNSEL

The Yakama Nation Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) operates with a mission that goes significantly beyond typical corporate or government legal departments. Its core mandate is to advance the rights secured under the 1855 Treaty and to strengthen the Yakama Nation's sovereignty and inherent right to self-determination. This involves a dual focus for OLC's legal team: providing comprehensive, high-quality civil legal services for the efficient operation of the Tribal Government and serving as the Yakama Nation's advocate in high-stakes litigation across federal and state forums.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE MANDATE: TRIBAL COUNCIL DIRECTION

OLC's strategic priorities and operational parameters are not set arbitrarily. They are a direct reflection of the will of the Yakama Nation's elected leadership.

OLC is strictly guided by the Tribal Council's direction, executing legal strategies designed to advocate for the Yakama Nation's sovereign authority, customs, and traditions. This ensures that OLC's legal work—from drafting contracts to engaging in complex federal lawsuits—is consistent with the Tribal Council's strategic vision.

THE OLC TEAM AND ITS FUTURE

OLC is staffed by a dedicated and diverse team of legal professionals. The current structure consists of eight in-house attorneys, two legal staff, and one government affairs liaison. The commitment to in-house growth is a core pillar of OLC's operational strategy. This deliberate effort to maximize the capabilities and expertise of the in-house team serves multiple strategic benefits:

- It allows Yakama Nation to retain critical institutional knowledge within the OLC
- Ensures that cultural competence guides every legal strategy
- Translates directly into reduced expenditures on costly outside fees

THE INTERNAL ENGINE: TRIBAL GOVERNANCE AND OPERATIONS

One of OLC's critical roles is serving as the principal legal department for the internal operations of the Tribal Government. OLC provides the necessary legal infrastructure for a large, modern, and complex sovereign government to function day-to-day.

The sheer volume of this internal work underscores its importance. In Fiscal Year 2025 alone, OLC worked on, completed, and returned a record **530 Requests for Legal Services (RLS)**. This is the primary channel for direct and responsive legal services to the Tribal Government's departments and programs. These services manage risk and ensure compliance across a complex range of governmental needs. OLC staff negotiate

and draft contracts, review, and draft governmental documents, and advise on risk management issues as well as provide general legal research and counsel.

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY AND GOVERNMENT TO GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

OLC's in-house role is not limited to general legal services. It extends to the areas of policy and intergovernmental communication. OLC, in coordination with the Tribal Council, construct platforms for government-to-government engagement to advance the Yakama Nation's interests in federal and state policy. This support includes:

- Intergovernmental communication (drafting government correspondence and policy recommendations that formally state the Yakama Nation's position on critical matters)
- Legislative policy analysis (monitoring proposed state and federal legislation, tracking regulatory changes, and providing Tribal Council with information to support decision making)
- Direct advocacy and representation (coordinating official visits, organizing key meetings, and facilitating communication between the Tribal council and its governmental counterparts)

By maintaining this robust advocacy arm, OLC effectively defends the Yakama Nation's position outside of litigation, ensuring that the principle of self-determination is honored by its governmental partners.

THE EXTERNAL DEFENSE: PROTECTING TREATY-RESERVED RESOURCES AND TERRITORY

Where the rubber meets the road for the Yakama Nation's sovereignty is the external, often litigious, defense of its Treaty-reserved rights. OLC is organized into several critical areas to manage this work, with Fiscal Year 2025 providing clear evidence of their proactive advocacy.

Environmental and Resource Protection

OLC consistently challenges large industrial developments that threaten the cultural and natural integrity of the Yakama Nation's Ceded Lands.

- **Contesting Large Energy Projects**
Mounting a proactive defense of culturally sensitive lands by challenging projects like the Horse Heaven Hills Wind and Solar Farm Project and the **Goldendale Pumped Storage Facility** (area shown below), arguing that these projects would devastate cultural resources, critical wildlife habitat, and impact water.

Water Rights and Fisheries

Protecting the Yakama Nation's Treaty-reserved water rights, instream flows, and fisheries habitat.



- **Land Use Settlements:** Successfully securing protection of critical water resources and riparian (riverbank) habitats through litigation settlements of land use regulations in Okanogan and Kittitas counties.
- **Treaty Fishing Matters:** Continuing and building upon the Yakama Nation's long running participation in *U.S. vs. Oregon* and *U.S. vs. Washington* and engaging in parallel litigation to protect endangered Columbia River fishery stocks from extinction.

Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

The defense of the Yakama Nation's Treaty Territory and jurisdiction is constant. OLC actively asserts and defends the Yakama Nation's rights against challenges from state, county, and even other tribal government.

- **Protecting Citizens:** Prevailing against the City of Toppenish in litigation to secure a cold weather shelter for unhoused Yakama Nation members.
- **Territorial Defense:** Asserting the exclusive nature of the Treaty Territory by opposing the encroachment efforts of other Tribes, specifically challenging the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation's efforts to establish a gaming facility in Pasco and the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon's efforts to establish Columbia River fishing rights within the Yakama Nation's Treaty-reserved usual and accustomed areas.

Audit Update

Strengthening Financial Coordination and Audit Readiness

Significant strides have been made in enhancing collaboration between Finance division programs and departmental teams to ensure the successful completion of all FY 2023 adjusting entries. Previously unrecorded liabilities have been identified and resolved, marking a critical milestone in achieving financial accuracy and accountability. In addition, daily accounting processes—once fragmented—have been streamlined under the guidance of the Finance Officer. These improvements have laid a strong foundation for audit readiness, which remains a top priority across the Tribal Government. To sustain this progress, regular reconciliation procedures have been implemented, reinforcing consistency, transparency, and timely reporting throughout our financial operations.

Next Steps Toward Audit Compliance

To maintain momentum, internal audit check-in meetings will continue with various departments, ensuring alignment and focus on achieving full audit compliance. Additionally, the onsite audit date has been adjusted and is now scheduled for November 10-13, 2025. These proactive measures reflect our commitment to accountability and readiness as we approach this critical phase. The commencement of the FY 2024 audit will occur immediately upon the completion and official filing of the FY 2023 audit report with the Federal Audit Clearinghouse (FAC).

TO STAY UPDATED WITH YAKAMA NATION GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, USE THE FOLLOWING



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