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PM promises native band share of fishery: Treaty clears way for port expansion

VANCOUVER - Prime Minister Stephen Harper committed his government Friday to a modern-day treaty that will give a West Coast native band a guaranteed quota of Fraser River salmon, a move that has angered one of Harper's MPs and disenchanted many of his longtime loyalists.

The treaty, also controversial because it awards the Tsawwassen First Nation more than 200 hectares of prime coastal farmland that can now go to industrial use, is valued by the native band at about \$119 million.

After 13 years of negotiations, the deal is expected to be put to a vote in the next few months in the B.C. legislature and the House of Commons, where it is likely to easily pass. The 358 members of the Tsawwassen band, which is located on a slice of waterfront near Vancouver, will likely vote on the deal this summer.

"This is a great day for us," said Tsawwassen Chief Kim Baird on Friday.

But to get the proposed treaty, the second in less than six weeks under B.C.'s treaty process, Harper has had to pay a political price.

Conservative MP John Cummins, a longtime loyalist, publicly criticized the treaty as creating a "racially based" fishery because a side-agreement awards the natives a share of the salmon fishery -- from 0.7 to about three per cent, depending on the species. The treaty values the salmon fishery at under \$2.7 million annually.

That has also drawn the ire of some West Coast fishermen, who say Harper has abandoned his promise to oppose a fishery with preferential quotas.

But there are far larger stakes than fish at play in this treaty.

Both the federal and provincial governments are hoping to expand a container port that sits just off the waterfront property of the tiny B.C. native band. A treaty will make it possible for a major expansion because the Tsawwassen want to use some of the 207 hectares they will be granted to build warehouses and storage facilities for the millions of containers that could be arriving from Asia in years ahead.