

Nespelem Opportunity DRAFT#1

With nearly 6,000 residents, the Okanogan County portion of the Colville Reservation has experienced relatively minimal population change over the last two decades. Nespelem is the only incorporated community fully enclosed within the Colville Reservation – encompassing geography in both Okanogan and Ferry Counties.

As of the 2020 U.S. Census, Nespelem was home to 180 residents – a nearly 25% population loss of 65 residents as compared with the decade-earlier 2010 count. However, Nespelem is a governmental and service center serving both the Okanogan and Ferry County portions of the reservation.

SR 155 is the travel corridor serving Nespelem and the entire Okanogan County portion of the Colville Reservation. This corridor provides access north and west to Omak, and south to Grand Coulee Dam, with continued access east to Spokane.



Nespelem is the major community within the Okanogan County portion of the Colville Reservation.

- Area outlined in orange is the U.S. Census County Division (CCD) encompassing the Okanogan County portion of the Colville Reservation.

DEMOGRAPHICS

While slow growing, a young population and high local wage levels suggest opportunity ahead:

- At 33 years, the median age of Nespelem residents is younger than the 36-year median for all Okanogan County reservation residents and well below 43-year age county-wide.
- With over 3.2 persons per residential unit, average household size in town is well above comparable 2.7 figure of the Okanogan reservation area and 2.4 average county-wide.
- Median household income of in-town residents is estimated at less than \$32,000, 65% of median income for the Okanogan reservation and 59% of the county-wide median.
- While very little new housing has been built directly in Nespelem since 2010, over 120 new units have been built on the Okanogan County portion of the reservation over this period. This equates to about 6% of area housing having been constructed since 2010, a rate of production that is about 60% of that experienced county-wide over this period.

LABOR FORCE & EMPLOYMENT

About 56% of reservation residents in Okanogan County age 16+ are currently in the labor force – a participation rate that is slightly above the 55% participation rate for all residents county-wide who are age 16 and older. Of added note:

- As of 2019 (pre-pandemic), employers on the Okanogan portion of the reservation employed 2,200 workers; the on-reservation job count increased 34% from 2010-19.
- With 15% of Okanogan County's jobs as compared with 14% of county-wide population, the Okanogan part of the reservation is a major contributor to county-wide job base.
- About one-third of all on-reservation jobs have been in public administration – well above the 10% of share of employment represented by government county-wide.
- The most significant employment increase experienced from 2010-19 was in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting – up by about 340 jobs. Other sectors with strong growth of 80 to 105 added jobs each are manufacturing, health care/social assistance, wholesale trade and public administration.
- About 45% of on-reservation workers are native American. As compared with all of Okanogan County, on-reservation workers tend to be better paid, male, with high school or some college education, and middle age (from 30-54).

While not yet available at the local community level, recent 2020-21 data county-wide indicates that employment has yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels. Natural resource, hospitality and local government employment has been most adversely affected. Jobs now exceed pre-pandemic counts in construction, manufacturing, distribution, retail and business services.

COMMUNITY ASSETS & PRIORITIES

Assets of Nespelem and the greater reservation area within Okanogan County portion of the Colville Reservation as cited by planning documents and stakeholders include existing gaming activity and natural resource capacity – coupled with the extensive CCT reservation land base and demonstrated tribal capacity to plan and carry through on complex project transactions. One stakeholder observed that the COVID pandemic experience demonstrated community leadership as “very strong and ability to adjust on the fly was pretty great.” Or as summarized by the comment that it’s about “the people.”

Challenges relate to limited infrastructure and lack of buildable land. Also noted are needs for improving education levels together with child care and employment opportunities.

The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (CTCIR) maintain adopted Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies, the principal purpose of which is to “facilitate the retention and creation of living wage jobs and to foster a stable and diversified regional economy, all for the intended outcome of maintaining and, ultimately improving the quality of life in the CTCIR.”

Per the adopted strategy and input from CCT tribal planning, **community priorities** include:

- Business diversification for higher wage jobs plus workforce development and childcare
- Broadband and communications infrastructure
- Assistance with roads and transportation infrastructure
- Energy efficiency projects – as with woody biomass, solar, wind and hydro power

- Housing development and a farmers’ market for fresh fruits and vegetables
- Environmental preservation and livability emphasis

Nespelem has an opportunity to continue and enhance its role as a center for governmental and service activities benefitting the Okanogan and Ferry County portions of the reservation. Some opportunities are likely to be focused near urban population and labor force. An example is noted for former mill site redevelopment – as a master planned industrial park including set-asides for a clinic, head start, wellness center and ballfields at an existing CCT site near Omak.

Asked about a **vision for the future**, one stakeholder emphasizes an ongoing need for CCT to provide essential public and community services. Another simply states: “walkable communities.” As a survey responded noted, a **thriving economy** for CCT residents could look like “opportunities for employment and equitable distribution of wealth.” Another perspective emphasizes “affordable housing, walkability to important places, the quality of jobs available.

NEXT STEPS

Building from the tribal record of strategic economic development planning, key next steps for Nespelem and the western Okanogan portion of the Colville Reservation could be to:

- Start with a steering committee to create and coordinate **an action plan** focused on the western portion of the reservation – drawing on the expertise of interested businesses, citizens and civic leaders
- Focus on identified **needs and opportunities** for improved and more diversified employment opportunity with responsible natural resource utilization and creation of walkable community environments, perhaps starting in Nespelem
- Look for opportunities to engage the Nespelem and greater CCT community for near-term wins, **building momentum** for longer term initiatives that may require both local and outside funding



With just 180 residents as of the 2020 Census, Nespelem is losing population and employment. Yet the town offers a compact grid and role as CCT tribal center, offering opportunities for development infill and enhanced walkability to attract and retain new residents and jobs.

Both here and throughout the NCW region, neighboring communities are encouraged to work collaboratively. This could be of particular value in collaboration with immediately adjoining centers of Omak and Okanogan at the reservation’s western edge – as well as with tribal partners on the Ferry county side of the Colville Reservation.

STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY

Of the varied communities of the NCW region, Nespelém and the Okanogan portion of the Colville Reservation is most distinctive for its federal reservation status and predominant Native American population. While well balanced between the region's share of population and employment, there appears to be some mismatch between a high proportion of good-paying (primarily tribal governmental) jobs but lower overall household incomes and high poverty rates.



As "A Beautiful Valley Between Two Hills," Nespelém was first settled in the 1880-90s. The town reached its population high point with construction of Grand Coulee Dam in the 1930s. Today, the town "seeks sustainable growth that protects our natural and historic resources, while preserving our values, qualities and culture."
- Photo per CCT History/Archaeology and City web site
<https://www.townofnespelem.com/>

Opportunities also appear to be more limited for younger workers. A diversified and networked development program can serve to improve economic and quality of life for tribal residents and the nearby communities of Omak and Okanogan.

As a regional partnership, the Okanogan County Economic Alliance and North Central Washington Economic Development District (NCWEDD) encourage the identification and submittal of *shovel-ready* or *potential shovel-ready* economic and community development projects for project review and ranking.

Top-ranked projects will receive grant writing and administration support from the Alliance and NCEDDD. The closer to *shovel-ready*, the *better the opportunity* for successful funding.

This *community profile* has been prepared by the North Central Washington Economic Development District (NCWEDD) serving communities of Chelan, Douglas and Okanogan Counties.

Data is compiled from sources including U.S. Census, Washington Office of Financial Management (OFM), Washington Employment Security Department (ESD), and the nationally recognized private firm Claritas.

For further information as to business and investment opportunities and economic development programs for the Nespelém communities and the greater NCW region, contact Alyce Brown, NCWEDD Executive Director via phone at 509-899-9321, email director@ncwedd.com

Or contact Roni Holder-Diefenbach, Executive Director for the Economic Alliance of Okanogan County, phone 509-826-5107, email rholderdiefenbach@economic-alliance.com