

# Honoring a Legacy: Police Chief Mitch Hicks Retires from CRITFC Enforcement Department

*By CRITFC Communications*

HOOD RIVER – After more than three decades of dedicated service, Police Chief Mitch Hicks is retiring from the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) Enforcement Department. His enforcement career, which began in 1993, has been marked by significant contributions to the protection and enforcement of tribal fishing rights and broader community safety.

“Chief Hicks has honorably served CRITFC and its member tribes for three of the four decades CRITFC has been on the Columbia River,” said Aja DeCoteau, CRITFC executive director. “I appreciate his commitment to fisheries and law enforcement that he combined with his dedication to incorporating traditional values and sensitivity to create a team dedicated to community service policing. Chief Hicks will be missed, but his contributions and legacy will continue to guide our intertribal work of protecting salmon, treaty-reserved fishing rights, and the tribal community living and fishing along the Columbia River.”

Hicks’ journey with CRITFC started in 1993, during a time of growth and change for the department. “When I started in 1993, the department had about 10 or 12 officers and 4 or 5 dispatchers. It was a smaller staff than it is currently,” Hicks recalls. This period saw an influx of funding from the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) for fish and wildlife conservation, which facilitated the expansion of the patrol force, including Hicks’ own hiring.

Throughout the 1990s, Hicks witnessed and contributed to the department’s evolution. A brief interruption in BPA funding was resolved in 1999, leading to the creation of a new sergeant position to oversee field operations related to the BPA contract. Hicks was promoted to this role, working alongside Sergeant Ted Lamebull, Captain Jerry Ekker, and Chief John Johnson.

The early 2000s brought further challenges and responsibilities. The development of treaty fishing access sites increased calls for policing service, prompting CRITFC to seek a 638 contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to provide comprehensive law enforcement at these sites. This contract was secured in 2010, marking a significant expansion of the department’s mission.

In 2013, Hicks was promoted to police chief, overseeing a period of substantial growth. The department expanded its staffing and funding sources, including appropriations from the Department of the Interior, BPA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and several federal grants. One notable achievement was securing a grant from the Office for Victims of Crime in

2018, which enabled the addition of a full-time victim services advocate. Further funding in 2023 and 2024 allowed for the addition of a second advocate, enhancing the department's victim assistance capabilities.

Reflecting on his career, Hicks expresses deep appreciation for the unique experiences and relationships he has built. "Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to interact with tribal elders and leaders, gaining a deeper understanding of cultural practices and the connections between all of the Creator's gifts within the landscape," he says. Hicks also acknowledges the support and camaraderie within the department and the broader CRITFC organization, which he describes as having a deeper passion for their work than many other governmental agencies.

Hicks' tenure has seen its share of challenges, including dealing with the loss of life in the Big River and responding to various emergencies. However, he also cherishes the moments when he was able to help those in need and hold offenders accountable, providing a sense of justice and peace for victims. "Seeing the best in people and doing what I could to alleviate some of the sorrow has been incredibly meaningful," he reflects.

At the May CRITFC commission meeting held on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Chief Hicks was honored for his dedicated service with a special ceremony where colleagues and friends expressed their gratitude and shared heartfelt messages. The ceremony underscored the profound impact of Chief Hicks' leadership and the deep sense of loss felt by his colleagues upon his retirement.

Ron Suppah, CRITFC Commissioner for Warm Springs, reflected on his long-standing friendship with Hicks. He expressed his appreciation for their time spent together, reminiscing about their conversations and shared experiences.

Suppah concluded his remarks with a heartfelt farewell, encouraging Hicks to enjoy his well-deserved retirement and continue his adventures, saying, "Anyways, I guess it's time for you to go home, saddle up your horse, and take a ride. Congratulations, we'll miss you."

Wilbur Slockish, Jr., Yakama Nation Commissioner and one of the River Chiefs, also spoke highly of Chief Hicks. He emphasized Hicks' efforts to bridge understanding between state authorities and Indigenous practices concerning the environment and wildlife. Slockish praised Hicks for his dedication to conveying the significance of natural resources like plants, deer, elk, and roots to their people. He expressed his hope that the next police chief would continue Hicks' legacy of advocacy and cultural integration.

Slockish, Jr. highlighted the strong bond he developed with Hicks through their interactions, stating, "I'm going to miss Mitch. We butted heads, but when you do that, you develop a good strong relationship and a bond. I'm thankful for that and for the time I got to be with Mitch."

Hicks' personal life has been as rich and fulfilling as his professional one. A Shoshone-Bannock tribal citizen from Fort Hall, Idaho, Hicks worked in various industries before finding his calling in law enforcement. His wife Tiffany Hicks, a Choctaw tribal citizen, has also had a twenty-year career in law enforcement and public administration. She has served on the Hood River Police, Clackamas County Department of Children and Family Services, and as a regional narcotics investigations analyst for the Oregon-Idaho High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA). In 2024, Tiffany accepted the position of Director of Probation for Teton County, Idaho.

Tiffany was also honored during the two-hour retirement ceremony for Chief Hicks. She was thanked and honored with a gift for her contributions to the community alongside Mitch.

Closing the ceremony, Chief Hicks said he and his wife had had the honor of raising two children and are now looking forward to their next adventure in his homelands in Idaho.

As Mitch Hicks retires, he leaves behind a legacy of dedication, growth, and community service. His impact on the CRITFC Enforcement Department and the communities it serves will be felt for years to come.