

NEWS RELEASE

Documents Reveal DFO “Caved Under Pressure” in Mismanagement of Skeena Fishery

Vancouver, B.C. (June 25, 2007) – Conservationists and Northwest B.C. residents are calling for an independent review of B.C.’s second largest salmon fishery after documents obtained under the *Freedom of Information Act* revealed disturbing mismanagement by Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO).

The documents show that in 2006, under pressure from the fishermen’s union, Prince Rupert’s mayor and other politicians, DFO managers allowed severe over-fishing at the mouth of the Skeena River. Gillnet boats fished 29 days in 2006, over twice the 10-year average. This resulted in excessive by-catch of steelhead and weak salmon stocks and contributed to dangerously low returns to many Skeena tributaries.

“DFO’s failure to responsibly manage this fishery is endangering the long-term health of Skeena wild salmon and the economy of the entire Skeena watershed,” said Vicky Husband with Watershed Watch Salmon Society. “We are calling for an independent investigation to determine what happened in 2006 and ensure mismanagement isn’t repeated this season.”

The documents show DFO refused to take enforcement action after they learned fishermen were ignoring rules designed to avoid killing weak salmon and steelhead stocks.

“The real issue for me is that we said we would fish selectively to minimize harvest impacts on non-target species and we caved under pressure,” reads an internal memo by senior DFO biologist Steve Cox-Rogers obtained through Freedom of Information.

DFO’s management plan – agreed to by all stakeholders at the start of the season – called for commercial openings to end in early August, but after intensive political lobbying, fishing occurred until September 6.

“These documents show DFO managers put politics ahead of science in making critical management decisions,” says Craig Orr, Executive Director of Watershed Watch Salmon Society. “They had management tools to protect endangered salmon and steelhead populations and they chose not to use them. Their actions had serious impacts on stocks Skeena First Nations depend on for food and have been trying to rebuild for years.”

Damage to up-river fisheries meant many businesses lost bookings and clients.

“The early-run steelhead numbers were some of the lowest in 50 years. All indicators showed DFO should have scaled back the fishery, but they chose not to at the expense of wild salmon. It’s nothing short of a scandal,” stated Greg Knox, chair of the North Coast Steelhead Alliance.

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Backgrounder

The Skeena salmon fishery

- The Skeena River salmon fishery is BC's second largest salmon fishery next to that of the Fraser River. It includes both a commercial fishery based out of Prince Rupert, several up-river First Nations fisheries, and a world-renowned sport fishery for steelhead.
- IBM Business Consulting estimates that wild salmon contribute \$110 million to the annual economy of the Skeena watershed.
- The in-ocean salmon fishery near the mouth of the Skeena River is largely non-selective. Gillnet fishing gear used to catch sockeye also result in the by-catch of coho and steelhead that intermingle with the sockeye runs.
- To decrease the impact of the gillnet sockeye fishery, DFO imposes a number of rules on fishermen. These include:
 - Revival boxes ("blue boxes"): fish tanks used onboard boats to resuscitate incidentally caught steelhead/coho before releasing them back to the water
 - Weedlines: used to suspend gillnet mesh below the water surface to allow species which migrate predominantly near the surface to pass over the net unharmed.
 - Short nets and short sets: a fishing technique that reduces the length of time the gillnet is in the water, thereby increasing the survival of by-catch.
- Fisheries and Oceans Canada defines salmon conservation as the foremost management priority, followed by First Nations' constitution right to food fisheries and lastly, other commercial and recreational fisheries.
- Fisheries and Oceans Canada holds jurisdiction over commercial salmon fisheries and tidal sport fisheries. The Fish and Wildlife Branch of the BC Ministry of Environment is responsible for non-tidal sport fisheries for non-salmon species, including steelhead.

What went wrong in 2006

- DFO increased the number of sockeye openings after heavy lobbying from the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union, the Mayor of Prince Rupert and others:
 - *"So far we are looking at limiting the amount of gillnet fishing once the incidental species gain in abundance (after this week)"*
[July 17 e-mail from Marck Potyrala (DFO) to Dean Peard (MOE)]
 - *"I cannot understand why we have had "regular" gill net fisheries during the latter part of July and now into August."*
[Aug. 3 e-mail from Dana Atagi (MOE) to David Einarson, DFO N. Coast Area Chief]
 - *"...our Mayor flew to Vancouver to get DFO to provide more fishing time and so we ended up fishing a few more days."*
[Memo by Steve Cox-Rogers e-mailed to Dana Atagi October 11, 2006]

- *“There was even mention of the lobby of Loyola Hearn on this matter...”*
[Nov. 3 e-mail from Dana Atagi (MOE) to Jamie Alley (MOE)]
- *“Flight yesterday counted 78 gillnets fishing ...expect 30-40 out there today.”*
[Sept. 6 e-mail from David Einarson (DFO) to Dana Atagi (MOE)]
- DFO did not adequately monitor or enforce its own rules aimed at reducing the mortality of incidentally caught steelhead/coho:
 - *“The real issue for me is that we said we would fish selectively to minimize harvest impacts on non-target species and we caved under pressure.”*
[October 11 Memo by Steve Cox-Rogers e-mailed to Dana Atagi (MOE)]
 - *“I doubt there will be anything technical I can provide that will show we (DFO) implemented any of the selective fishery objectives for steelhead as outlined in section 3.1.6 of the 2006 IMFP.”*
[Aug. 17 e-mail from Steve Cox-Rogers to Siegi Kriegl]
 - *“...none of the boats we sampled had functioning blue boxes on board ...in fact, all of the fishermen I spoke to expressed little desire to participate in reviving steelhead or coho and were just throwing them back dead or alive as they hit the boat. ..The proportion of boats using weedlines seems to be very low to non-existent this year...”*
[Aug. 8 E-mail from Steve Cox-Rogers to David Einarson, DFO North Coast Area Chief]
 - *“Some management philosophy as optics now are important. The GN [gillnet] fleet has fished three days straight with little selectivity, and Dan is considering letting them go go [sic] for another five days...my view is fishing to ceiling guidelines is one thing, but it is how it is done that will come back to haunt us.”*
[Aug. 21 e-mail from Steve Cox-Rogers to David Peacock]

Conclusions

- Immediate actions must be taken to prevent the mismanagement that occurred last season from being repeated in 2007. Given the imprecision of the Skeena fishery management model, fisheries managers must act in a more precautionary manner.
- An independent, scientific review of the Skeena salmon fishery must be undertaken as soon as possible in order to determine the flaws in the Skeena fishery management model and provide the basis for improving future management.

The organizations

- **Watershed Watch Salmon Society** is a B.C.-based conservation organization that works to catalyze efforts to protect and restore B.C.'s wild salmon. It does this using scientific expertise, strategic alliances, outreach programs, and innovative projects.
Website: www.watershed-watch.org
- **North Coast Steelhead Alliance** is committed to securing escapement of wild steelhead in sufficient numbers to sustain healthy wild steelhead stocks and a robust sport fishery in northwestern British Columbia. Website: www.ncsteelheadalliance.ca