July 23, 2004

Watershed Talk

Volume VIII
Issue 8

A weekly Aboriginal fisheries newsletter for fisheries representatives and their organizations

TECHNICAL UPDATE

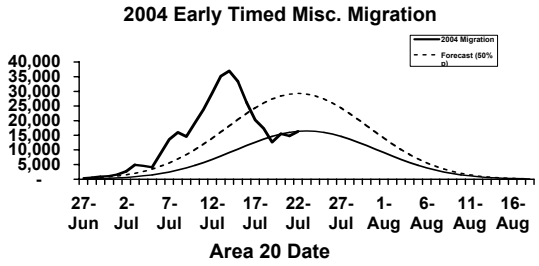
By Pete Nicklin, Assistant Stock Management Coordinator – indiseaent@shaw.ca

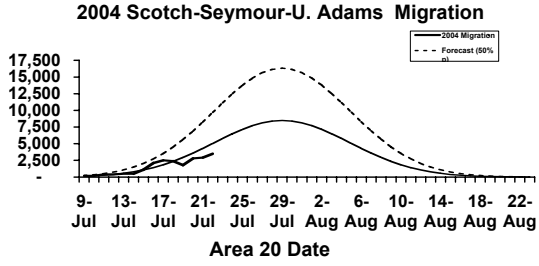
This update is from information available on July 22, 2004 unless otherwise stated.

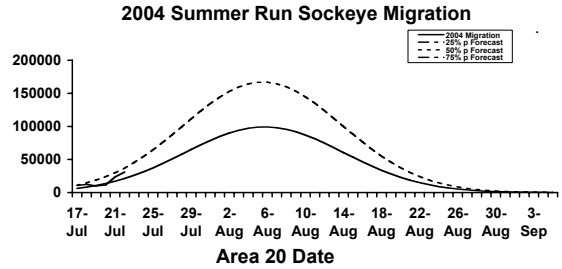
Summary

Cautious optimism flavoured the technical update on July 22. The Early Stuart gross escapement at Mission showed 202,000, and the Early Summer aggregate has a projected escapement of 423,300 (with a Mission gross escapement of 311,000). The optimism was tempered by the Qualark temperature reading of 19.5 degrees Celsius, which is 1/2 a degree higher than on the same date back in 1998 (a very warm year, with lots of en-route sockeye mortality). Temperatures in the Nechako dropped to 17.5 degrees. Hope discharge is approximately 3575 cms, or 31% lower than normal. The current Environmental Management Adjustment (EMA) remains at 34% of the escapement target, meaning that 34% of the projected escapement will die en-route to spawning (due to temperatures/flows). However, it should be noted that the measured EMA impact in 1998 turned out to be 44% of the escapement target, so there will likely be discussion around the need for recalculating this year's figure.

Graphs







Mission Gross Escapement Table

Mission	Escapement	Early	F/B	Scotch/	L. Stuart/		
Date	Total	Stuart	G/N/P	Seymour	Stellako	Quesnel	Chilko
Mission Total:	554,000	202,000	311,000	3,000	35,000	1,000	2,000
(Potential Gross Escapement-to-date, Incl F.N. Catch below Mission)							

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JUST A FEW CHINOOK

"Disconnecting from change does not recapture the past. It loses the future."- **Kathleen Norris**

By Ken Wilson, Stock Management Coordinator – wilsonkh@telus.net

Editors Note: This article is a revised and condensed version of the original piece, and was edited strictly for length. The original piece will be released in an as-yet-undetermined format. Please read the full article as soon as it becomes available in order to fully appreciate this important chinook management issue. – Pete N.

An Introduction

I've been told that during the early 1950's, the area 29 (now the area E) gillnet fishery for Fraser salmon was open for over 150 days a year. Chinook fisheries were a big part of the season for may Fraser gill netters, but Fraser chinook were in serious trouble by the late 1970's. The Fraser gill net fleet can't be blamed for the decline of Fraser chinook. The rapid growth of ocean troll fisheries in the service of our fish war with the US played a role. The area E gill net fleet has paid a huge price to rebuild Fraser chinook. DFO recognized the rapid decline in the terminal abundance of Fraser chinook in the 1970s. Without a Pacific Salmon Treaty to help control ocean chinook fisheries, DFO took decisive unilateral action in 1981 to protect Fraser chinook stocks, and closed the River to commercial gill netting for chinook. At the time, DFO

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promised that when the runs recovered, the gill net fishery for chinook in the lower Fraser would be the first to reopen. Area 29 commercial gill-netters haven't fished for chinook since, but most still remember the promise broken.

This week, Fraser First Nations have been asked to respond to a last minute proposal to reopen the commercial gill net fishery for chinook in Area 'E' on a very limited basis. The proposal calls for 24 boats harvesting no more than 2,500 chinook over two days of fishing. It's hard to get excited about a small commercial harvest by gill nets in the lower Fraser, particularly when you understand the history. Nevertheless, this proposed fishery is perhaps a signal of things to come.

Do the fish need catching?

Many, but certainly not all Fraser chinook runs are doing well (although there are recurring problems with some of the early-timed chinook populations). Most biologists familiar with the Fraser chinook situation agree that the management groupings should be overhauled to reflect a system that makes more biological sense. Managing just two huge groups of upriver chinook (springs and summers) means the Area E fleet will harvest weak and strong stocks together. The Shuswap 4 sub 1 chinook, are the strongest component of the Fraser summer chinook, and these stocks could withstand significant harvest, but migrating along with these fish are many less productive stocks (the Nechako, miscellaneous upper Fraser stocks like the Cariboo, and the now very rare lower river summer red chinook). This proposal is really an attempt to harvest Shuswap chinook, but because of concerns for late sockeye, the fishery is taking place in mixed stock areas of the lower Fraser a week or more before the peak of the Shuswap migration. This increases the harvest impacts on weak co-migrating stocks.

Why would DFO consider opening a gill net fishery for chinook (even if there was a way to identify a surplus), when DFO's own allocation guidelines for chinook put First Nations first, and give priority to sport and commercial hook and line fisheries over gill nets? If First Nations needs have been met (have they?), why not just catch these fish using hook and line gear? The answer is that the ocean hook and line fisheries are already facing restrictions to protect weak stocks.

Is there a better way?

In a perfect world, we would harvest surplus salmon from strong stocks without touching weaker stocks. As an example, DFO's proposal calls for a harvest of 2,500 chinook in the lower river, and by DFO's own estimates about half should be mid and upper Fraser fish while most of the rest would be Shuswap 4 sub 1 type chinook. The truth is no one knows what the proportions will be. Far more fish could be harvested with less damage to weak stocks if the Shuswap fish can be harvested cleanly. This can be accomplished, but not by a gill net fishery in the lower Fraser.

It's true that the proposed fishery is small in the big scheme of things, but DFO is holding out hope of better opportunities to come for Area E gill-netters. So what will the proposed 'demonstration' fishery demonstrate? Aside from some modest biological information that might be available from sampling the catch, a fishery in the lower Fraser will demonstrate that we can harvest mixed stocks of Fraser chinook in the lower Fraser with 8" nets (something we already know). This fishery, if approved will also demonstrate that little or nothing was learned from the mixed stock problems, fishery restrictions and listings of the last 25 years (something already demonstrated by recent sockeye fishing plans). By promoting this fishery DFO is demonstrating that it is prepared to continue ignoring the advice of its own biologists, who know that a resumption of commercial chinook gill netting in the lower Fraser will quickly lead to problems. This proposal also demonstrates that DFO is prepared to continue making empty promises to area E gill-netters. DFO seems to be suggesting to area E gill-netters that there is a future for their fleet in harvesting chinook in mixed stock areas of the lower Fraser, when in all likelihood there is none.

DFO's decision to float this proposal does nothing to help build a solid, defensible stock assessment and management framework for Fraser chinook. Any proposed new fisheries need to be evaluated thoroughly by a joint technical team in an open and transparent forum so that all the advice is on the public record. Finally, the allocation of fishing opportunities must be based on agreements and policies that have passed public scrutiny, and that respect the resource, the rights of First Nations, and the rights of commercial and sport harvesters. There must be consultation, and the consultations need to be informed by the facts.

Let's consider real change, rather than simply repeating things that didn't work in the past and likely won't work in the future. What is real change? What about a fish trap or commercial gear in Kamloops Lake? Perhaps some commercial gill-netters will be willing to fish someplace new using new methods, and perhaps some First Nations are interested in sharing their fishing areas with commercial harvesters in exchange for a share of the commercial opportunity. Perhaps not, but change is here, and like the salmon, we either adapt or die. One thing is certain; developing shared commercial/First Nations chinook harvesting opportunity in upriver areas of the Fraser may be difficult, but at least it holds real promise for the future. We need to explore fishing opportunities that

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offer a future to our commercial fleet while respecting and affirming aboriginal fishing rights.

The survival of Area E commercial salmon fishermen depends not on re-establishing a commercial chinook gill net fishery in the lower Fraser, but on the development of innovative fisheries that can be sustained in the face of growing conservation concerns, declining habitat capacity, and Treaties. Looking at the problems facing the Area E commercial fleet as a result of conservation concerns for Cultus sockeye, Upper Fraser coho, and steelhead, it is easy to imagine how just a few more significant conservation concerns could lead to a complete closure of this fishery. Proposals of this sort only push the Area E gill net fleet, and the resource itself, in the wrong direction. We can address these problems together, or DFO and Area E can just keep digging until its time to push the dirt in after them.

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UP COMING MEETINGS ETC:.

Tier 1 Technical Conference Call Update: July 29th, 4:00PM. Chairperson: Mike Staley. More information to follow via email.

Current Opening/Closing Times and the Harvest Information for Lower and Upper Fraser is posted on the FRAFS website at *www.frafs.ca*

WEB LINKS

Go to the Pacific Salmon Commission's (PSC's) website at *www.psc.org* for the most recent technical information.