

Watershed Talk

A weekly Aboriginal fisheries newsletter for
fisheries representatives and their organizations

THE FRASER RIVER SOCKEYE SPAWNING INITIATIVE

Since 1987 the setting of spawning escapement targets for Fraser River sockeye has been determined based on a program call the Rebuilding Strategy. In response to feedback received, Fisheries and Oceans Canada committed to review the current approach, incorporate new information and on-going policy development, and develop a formal framework for considering conservation and management objectives. The group that has been established to undertake this review is the Fraser River Sockeye Spawning Initiative. A steering committee composed of senior representatives from First Nations, industry, recreational, environmental non-government organizations and federal governments provides overall strategic direction for the initiative.

Many different factors affected escapement levels and catches of Fraser sockeye during the last 16 years. Changes in marine productivity, concerns for weak stocks and unforeseen issues such as the pre-spawn mortality in the Late Run aggregate, all contributed to the observed patterns of fishing and escapement. Some aggregates (e.g. Summer) have rebuilt considerably, but some individual stocks have also become conservation concerns (e.g. Cultus). In consideration of those issues, the spawning initiative has two main goals:

1. Manage spawning escapement so that conservation requirements are respected while social and economic values are addressed.
2. Reach agreement on an objective scientifically based approach for setting escapement targets for Fraser River sockeye.

The proposed approach will carry over many fundamental aspects of the current approach. Target exploitation rates vary with run size and small, co-

migrating stocks are protected through constraints on mixed stock exploitation rates. Proposed changes include:

1. Escapement plans for a given year will be based on target exploitation rate, not on a fixed escapement target. The reasoning behind this is that stock spawning capacity is highly uncertain, thus a harvest strategy based on target escapement is also uncertain.
2. Due to the fluctuating productivity observed on many stocks, the requirement to stay above brood year escapement will be removed. This should provide for increased flexibility and likely more fishing opportunities.
3. Harvest rules will be objectives-based to account for conservation, cultural, social and economic values.

An approach based on exploitation rates (as opposed to fixed escapement targets), which also considers the historical variability in stocks, will likely prove to be more sensitive to uncertainty around run size estimation. However, details such as in-season fishery and allocation decisions are not addressed in this initiative.

Three forums have provided guidance so far:

- A steering committee with senior First Nation and stakeholder representatives
- A technical working group with DFO & external experts
- Workshops for technical review and revision of information packages

The technical group has developed a computer model which takes into account the biology (productivity) of individual stocks, historical patterns of ocean productivity, migration rates, as well as the priorities and values of all interested parties to consider the most appropriate harvest policies for Fraser sockeye stocks. The purpose of the workshops has been to present the work of the technical group and to obtain direction and feedback from all participants. This has helped DFO refine the proposed approach for

managing spawning escapement prior to taking this initiative into broader consultation. The initiative has evolved considerably in response to the feedback we received from the steering committee, the external working group members and workshop participants.

- Effort has been dedicated to small group meetings with participants.
- The technical analyses have been reviewed and accepted as scientifically sound through the Pacific Scientific Advice Review Committee (PSARC) process.
- Additional analyses have been done to address specific questions and concerns raised at the three workshops held over the last year.

Next Steps

Separate meetings with First Nations and stakeholders are planned for November and December. One objective of these meeting is to identify specific concerns or questions.

An additional meeting of the Steering Committee has been planned for November. The direction we receive from this will culminate in a workshop to be held on January 6 & 7, 2004. Once a draft management proposal has been developed, it shall be distributed to interested parties mid-December in preparation for the January workshop.

Consultations on the proposed approach will be complete in early 2004, and it's proposed that implementation of the management proposal is undertaken in time for the 2004-fishing season.

If you have any further questions pertaining to the Fraser sockeye spawning initiative, please contact:

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