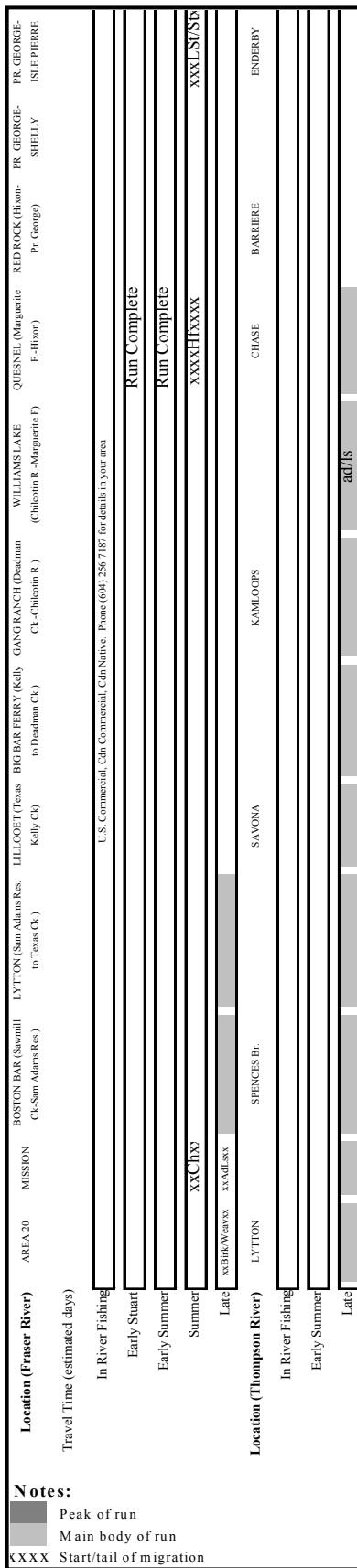


Watershed Talk

A weekly Aboriginal fisheries newsletter for
fisheries representatives and their organizations



UPDATE ON THE FRASER WATERSHED PROCESS

The Fraser Watershed process probably appears to be in a state of slumber, but it isn't. As most of you are aware during the months of July, August, and most of September, Aboriginal people from the bottom end to the top of the Fraser River are busy fishing, holidaying with families, or as September hits, hunting, or a combination of all of the above. As you can imagine trying to coordinate anything, let alone something as complex and difficult as a Watershed process is wrought with challenges.

In fisheries there is always something going on, there is always something to be done. From my perspective I guess the most significant thing happening lately has been, what I would call the testing of the waters, which is simply getting out and speaking with people from around the watershed, people involved in fisheries, and getting a feel for what they think. As far as I can tell there is a general feeling that a watershed process, what ever that might look like, is something people from all regions feel passionate about. There are, of course, many factors that need to be considered, not the least of which are: a communications plan, obtaining some sort of "buy in" from top political leaders, getting to know key contacts, funding, budgeting, assessing the "willingness" to proceed, development of a work plan and

roadmap for moving forward, logistics, and finally praying like hell.

To date many of the things I've just mentioned are at or near completion. Obtaining money to go and meet with Fraser First Nations is underway and looking optimistic, Brenda Gaertner and myself have developed an executive summary, cover letter, and final recommendations for moving forward which has been sent to every First Nations organization, either band or tribal council on the Fraser River, the buy from both First Nations and senior DFO bureaucrats is quite nebulous and more difficult to measure, its like trying to catch clouds, all in all though, I believe that senior bureaucrats within the department are interested in supporting the process, First Nations are somewhat more difficult to gage, but I feel optimistic.

Currently while Brenda is away on holidays my goal is simple: to have an Interim Executive committee (IEC) meeting on October 15, 2003 in Merritt, to secure funding for eight regional meetings with Fraser First Nations, organizing as many of the possible eight regional meetings to discuss the Gaertner report and recommendations, and finally to make contact with many Fraser First Nations over the next month and discuss any or all of the stuff I've just talked about. I look forward to the work ahead with a combination of

excitement and fear knowing only that I'm doing the best I can with what I have, and that the final outcome is in the hands of the creator.

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FRASER SOCKEYE SPAWNING ESCAPEMENT INITIATIVE

"If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."

--Albert Einstein

About this time last year, DFO embarked on what they call the "Fraser Sockeye Spawning Escapement Initiative". The purpose of this work in DFO's own words is to "Manage spawning escapements so that conservation requirements are respected while cultural, social and economic values are addressed". The problem is an old one. There are lots of stocks, some of them strong and others weak. If we can't harvest the strong stocks as hard as we'd like without over-harvesting the weak stocks, we have to look for a compromise. We can back off a little in the harvest of the strong stocks, and be more flexible in the way we set escapement goals for the weak stocks. Strong stocks will arrive on the spawning grounds in larger numbers than some commercial fishermen might not like, but weak stocks will still be harvested even when they return in numbers too small

to meet the needs of First Nations, fully seed the spawning grounds, feed the beasts and birds, and fertilize the forest.

At the heart of this process is a very complex computer model. It first looks at the way sockeye stocks in the Fraser have responded to fisheries in the past, and then assumes these stocks will respond similarly to fisheries in the future. It is not an assumption that most of us are happy to make, but we make it anyway, because if we don't, we have to stop pretending to manage fisheries, and just sit around waiting for mother nature and the Fraser Panel to surprise us again. Most of us understand that the future is not determined entirely or even mostly by the past, but there are lessons to be learned that can help us avoid making the same mistakes over and over again. The model does this by determining the strategy for harvesting Fraser sockeye that does the best job of satisfying the given management objectives (called the 'objective function' in modeling terms). The management objectives could be to maximize catch over the long term, while reducing the risk of driving small stocks to extinction, and might even include some consideration for needs of the bears, birds and trees. Almost anything a biologist can think of can be included in the objective function, which in itself is a scary thought.

I can't explain this model to you at all, much less simply. Instead, I have a few questions:

1.) What does your objective function look like? In other words, what do you value, and how should Fraser sockeye be managed to meet your needs? Where are you willing to compromise, and what's the bottom line beyond which you are not willing to compromise?

2.) How should we place a value on the ecosystem benefits of escaping salmon (the bears and birds and forest, etc).

3.) How do we trade off Aboriginal Rights against the economic benefits of commercial or sports harvest?

These questions aren't intended to make you mad, we really need the answers. Every time a commercial net goes in the water, it takes fish out of Indian nets and off the spawning grounds, and nothing in this initiative will change this fact. We need rules to fairly share the salmon we have, and if you don't get involved in this discussion, a biologist like me will do it for you. Now that's a scary thought.

I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody."

--Bill Cosby

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