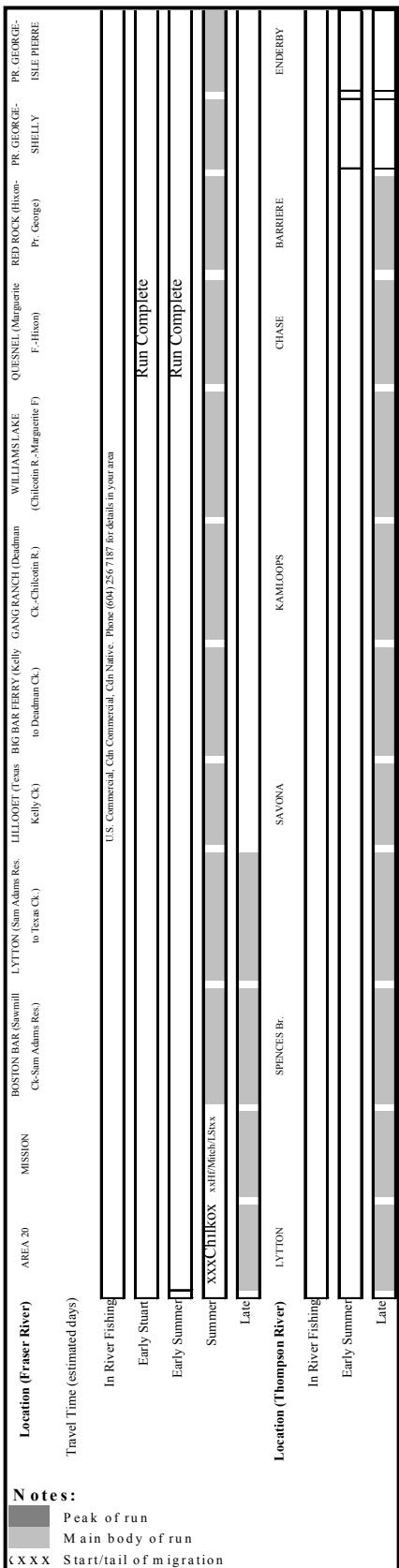


Watershed Talk

— A weekly Aboriginal fisheries newsletter for —
fisheries representatives and their organizations



Fish in Merritt at Risk

*Printed in Kamloops This Week:
Sunday August 31, 2003
By Dale West (Merritt Herald)*

It has been a tough summer for cattle and tough summer for fish.

The same drought conditions that are drying up traditional watering holes for cattle are also severely reducing local river and stream levels for fish, prompting Fisheries and Oceans Canada to urge water conservation.

Drought conditions have produced "critical low flows and high stream temperatures," says Dean Watts, DFO water use biologist, "causing lots of difficulty" for all fish, including salmon, in the Coldwater, Nicola and tributaries.

DFO personnel are noticing that the fish are really having difficulties when we have those really hot, dry periods as stream temperatures are getting above 22 -23 degrees.

Watt noted that "some flexibility" exists to boost stream levels, such as using the water behind the dam at Nicola Lake to provide some relief. Still, as much water as possible is being conserved for when it will be needed. "We obviously need water for the spawning and migration period. But we also need water for winter period, to keep those eggs wet if the fish actually do spawn.

Watt says water levels are the lowest since the last dry period in 1998. By September, if conditions remain unchanged, this could be one of the driest years on record since 1929. "It looks like about a

one-in-fifty-year, a one-in-60-year drought in terms of stream and hydrology."

Adult Chinook salmon presently in the river have been observed to be "very stressed." Juvenile salmon and trout are also being stressed.

"If things get any worse," says Watts, "we may start seeing significant mortality."

The last time fish mortality was noted was in 1998.

The next stock to come into the system are coho and they start to come up in mid September.

All summer has been critical for juvenile fish that remain in the system all year – sometime for two years before moving out to the ocean.

"We need a combination of weather patterns that reflect consistent precipitation and obviously cooler weather – both day time and night time temperature – to reduce stream temperatures, to try to get some of these streams, especially in the tributaries, to recover in terms of stream depth and volume," Watts says.

Water conservation is also needed, particularly if there is not a break in the weather.

“The biggest point we’re trying to get across to the public through notices and media releases is to have people think and act seriously on water conservation initiatives.

In a follow-up communication with Mr. Watts on September 11, 2003, he wished to add that Chinook

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appear to be doing OK at present, and although suffering some stress on hot days, it has not yet led to any notable increase in pre-spawn mortality rates. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans are still encouraging irrigators and other water uses to conserve water through the media and field monitoring efforts. For further information or to make comments, contact Dean Watts, DFO at (250) 851-4861.

TECHNICAL NEEDS UPDATE

I was reminded during a recent teleconference call of the IEC that I was given the task of preparing a Technical Needs Assessment for Fraser First Nations. I guess I've been putting it off, because I'm not sure where to start, given that almost every aspect of the management of Fraser salmon is changing.

The Pacific Salmon Commission (PSC) plays a major role in managing Fraser salmon. Fraser First Nations people have increased representation on the Fraser Panel of the PSC, and work is underway to involve First Nations technical staff on the various PSC Technical Committees. At the same time, funding difficulties originating in the United States could bring an end to the PSC and lead to dramatic changes in the role of DFO and Fraser First Nations in managing Fraser salmon and to significant adjustments in technical programs.

The recommendations from the 2002 Fraser Sockeye Review will be implemented over the coming year. These recommendations include a promise to finish the Wild Salmon

Policy by Christmas, and establish Harvest Planning Committees (with representation from all harvesting sectors) to take the lead on the development of Integrated Fisheries Management Plans each year. The Wild Salmon Policy will play a major role in guiding the management and conservation of Fraser Salmon stocks in the foreseeable future and depending on how the proposed Harvest Planning Committees are structured and the nature of the technical support process, significant changes in the salmon management process and the technical needs of Fraser First Nations are likely.

The clock is ticking on the legal listing of Sakinaw and Cultus sockeye and Upper Fraser Coho under the Species at Risk Act (SARA), and we will soon know how DFO plans to respond to these listings, and many others that appear inevitable unless our ocean salmon fisheries change quickly. It's fair to say that SARA will almost certainly lead to major changes in Fraser First Nations fisheries, and our technical needs.

Last but not least, salmon stock assessment budgets within the Fraser are being reduced and reallocated without any consultation with Fraser First Nations, despite the fact that these programs involve and affect First Nations, their fisheries, and their stocks, and despite the fact that the information obtained (or not) is critical to the conservation and management of Fraser Salmon.

Changes are also afoot within the watershed. The work of implementing the recommendations outlined by Brenda Gaertner in her

recent report to the watershed requires our urgent attention. As Fraser First Nations move to assume responsibility for managing their own fisheries and conserving their own stocks, our technical needs will change dramatically. At the same time, every First Nation that has a Right to harvest Fraser Salmon (no matter where they live and fish) must have an opportunity to be represented in this process. This will be difficult to say the least, if DFO continues to refuse to recognize or affirm Aboriginal Rights at the same time that they attempt to respect these rights in the development of fishing plans. First Nations both inside and outside the Fraser may soon have treaty rights to fish for Fraser Salmon, and fishing plans will have to deliver these fish. These changes will significantly increase our technical work-load, but the pace of this change is still unclear.

Technical fisheries work is not an end in itself, but work done in support of the fisheries management decision-making processes. From my perspective, the most urgent 'technical need' for Fraser First Nations is for a clear mandate, which can only come from a transparent and inclusive management decision-making process where everyone understands and accepts their Rights, roles and responsibilities.

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