

Watershed Talk

A weekly Aboriginal fisheries newsletter for
fisheries representatives and their organizations

Presentation to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Poverty

On November 30, 2009, Chief Fred Sampson of the Siska First Nation and Jeff Thomas of the Snuneymuxw First Nation traveled to Vancouver to speak to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Poverty. On behalf of the Fraser River and Approach Working Group (FRAWG) and First Nations in British Columbia, they requested that the committee extend their support to communities that have been suffering in recent years due to restricted access to traditional food sources.

Current Situation:

First Nations continue to depend on access to traditional food sources as their main source of protein. In the 1970's, a major study at UBC demonstrated that rural First Nations in BC maintained an acceptable level of nutrition as long as the protein source was not purchased, but was available from traditional foods. The study compared the communities of Ahousaht and Ulkatcho, at Anahim Lake.

Communities struggle to meet nutritional standards today. Although access to traditional protein sources through fishing and hunting are guaranteed under the Constitution, and First Nations' priority rights to fish have been defined by the courts, it is much more difficult now to maintain a healthy diet.

For the past three years, First Nations' access to Fraser salmon has been severely restricted. Far fewer salmon have returned than expected, yet access to the fish that should have been available required changes in government policy and practice, which could not be accomplished in time. We are looking for practical assistance, while others work on the political/legal issues.

FRAWG was set up to work with First Nations and government to improve access and sharing of Fraser salmon. The focus is on working together so that First Nations, coastal and interior, have more equitable access to salmon as food fish, which improves both basic community nutrition, and assists First Nations in maintaining an economic base in the fishery.

Impact on Health of First Nations Communities:

Diabetes Type 2 is endemic in First Nations communities in BC. Provincial Public Health officials are concerned that diabetes cases have doubled in BC in the past 10 years, but the rate of increase in the BC Aboriginal community is approximately 40% higher than in the general population.

The increase in diabetes is directly related to obesity and the food choices available in our communities. Where a First Nation community has restricted access to traditional food, families do the best they can to replace the traditional protein source with purchased food. However, with the higher cost of food in rural areas, and on-reserve single social assistance payments limited to \$135 per month per person, healthy food choices are not always easy to achieve, particularly for families. A shocking number of those newly diagnosed with diabetes are young adults and children. This is a preventable disease.

Background:

FRAWG includes First Nations from the BC Interior, Lower Fraser and Vancouver Island, as well as DFO staff. The group was formed in 2008 when it grew from a committee set up so that the First Nations using Fraser salmon could work together to share what food fish was available, in years of low abundance. In the last three

summers, sockeye salmon, the main salmon used for food, social and ceremonial purposes by First Nations, have failed to return in expected numbers.

The commercial fishing industry has been in decline for many years. Many coastal First Nations no longer have any capacity to fish. This means that community members who retain capacity have been doing the food fishing for their families and their communities. However, when the commercial industry shuts down, those boats no longer have income to do repairs or pay for fuel. In recent years, those few First Nations boats have had to make part of their income from food fishing for other First Nations, in order to retain their ability to fish at all.

Where food fish could previously be provided to family members at no cost, First Nations vessel owners are struggling to maintain their boats after three years of no income. In 2009, First Nations who were able to purchase fish for their members had to pay a sufficient amount to cover the costs of fishing. This is likely to be the pattern for the next few years.

Support Requested From The Standing Committee On Poverty:

Funds to Organize and Manage Food Fish in Low Abundance Years: First Nations need funding from Health Canada, INAC or any other government authority, in order to pay the costs of catching and distributing a basic number of salmon to their community members in years when few salmon are available. This will address the food and nutrition crisis that occurs in years when salmon are scarce, and will help to maintain food fishing capacity in the First Nations communities.

Make Salmon By-Catch Available To First Nations/ No Dumping At Sea: When DFO opens a First Nations food fishery targeting sockeye, other salmon species are caught at the same time. In the ocean fishery, DFO requires the seiner to dump all other kinds of salmon at sea, before the target species can be landed. In the river, similar rules apply. In years of low abundance like 2009, any fresh salmon by-catch should have been made available as food fish to interested First Nations communities.

First Nations are now looking at ways to ice and transport fish from the location where it is caught to communities who need it. Cultural preferences will be addressed First Nation-to-First Nation as they arise.

Employment Insurance Issue Affecting First Nations Communities: Employment Insurance credits earned in seasonal fisheries work cannot be combined with Employment Insurance earned from hourly employment. It is increasingly important that First Nations communities retain the capacity to do their own fishing, and that the youth can see the potential opportunities of working in this industry, even if the fishing activity is limited and seasonal.

This makes it particularly important that governments find a way to accommodate First Nations' need to combine both types of credits into a single Employment Insurance claim, so that individuals who fish for their community, and have other wage employment during the year, can have the support of the Employment Insurance program.

Meeting Notices

Pacific Salmon Treaty Fraser River Chapter Consultation Meeting

Tuesday, December 8

Sheraton Vancouver Airport
Hotel

(Formerly the Best Western)
7551 Westminster Hwy,
Richmond BC

Fraser Salmon Management Workshop

Wednesday, December 9 &

Thursday, December 10

Sheraton Vancouver Airport
Hotel

(Formerly the Best Western)
7551 Westminster Hwy,
Richmond, BC

Fraser Watershed Joint Technical Forum

Wednesday, January 20
(Tentative date)

Meeting location TBA
(Lower mainland)

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