

For Immediate release
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Low water flows may mean fewer summer-run steelhead trout in the lower Fraser River basin.

Surrey: Ministry of Environment (MoE) and BC Conservation Foundation (BCCF) staff with the Steelhead Recovery Program, with support from the BC Living Rivers Trust Fund, will be swimming the Coquihalla River August 20th to count adult steelhead returns. Collected data will aid in producing population estimates and determining recreational angling opportunities.

The only two summer-run steelhead populations in the lower Fraser River begin their migration to the Silverhope and Coquihalla Rivers in late June. The Coquihalla River flows south-westerly from its origin in the Cascade Mountains and enters the Fraser River near the town of Hope, approximately 150km east of Vancouver. The Coquihalla Highway follows the river from Hope to its confluence with Boston Bar Creek. Steelhead returning to the Coquihalla need adequate flow to ascend the falls at Othello, which usually occur in July. This year adequate flows occurred almost a month earlier than normal, and possibly before the steelhead made it in from the ocean.

According to the MoE River Forecast Centre, many gauged rivers across the south coast, including the Coquihalla, are experiencing significant low flows attributable to well below normal snowpacks and a lack of substantial rainfall late spring and early summer. Prolonged hot weather in July resulted in rapid evaporation of soil water and surface water, causing river levels to recede quicker than usual.

The Coquihalla is regarded by some as the birthplace of flyfishing in BC, but without adequate flows the steelhead may not make it over the falls.

"If too few spawners reach the river this year, a recreational fishery may not be possible this summer and returning adults in subsequent years could also be too low to support a fishery," said Environment Minister Barry Penner. "Recent rainfall has been a welcome relief, but river levels are still at low levels."

Historic snorkel counts of summer steelhead have been as high as one thousand fish, with a low of 97 adults counted in 2007.

Cooler weather will ease the rate of decline of river levels, but significant rainfall is required.

Fish can be observed trying to ascend the falls at the Othello Tunnels trail in Coquihalla Canyon Provincial Park. Those interested may join the swimmers to support this year's count.

- 30 -

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