

For Immediate Release
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Ensuring stored water is used wisely to support sockeye salmon and other fish species during summer in the Quatse River is the focus of a new study launched this spring by the BC Conservation Foundation and the Living Rivers Trust Fund.

PORT HARDY: Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) operates a small weir at the outlet of Quatse Lake, in the headwaters of the Quatse River watershed. Re-built and raised in 2005, the weir has enabled water storage to augment low summer flows since its construction in the 1980s.

Quatse Lake is located on the north-eastern end of Vancouver Island, about 3 kilometres (km) north of Coal Harbour in Kwakiutl First Nation traditional territory. The 12-km Quatse River flows north from the lake to Hardy Bay, at Port Hardy. The system is home to a unique run of sockeye salmon which begin their migration up river in early May. The salmon over-summer in the cooler depths of the lake then spawn in late September/October on the lakeshore and in tributaries to Quatse Lake. Sockeye that don't make it to the lake experience high mortality in the warm August river water.

The BC Conservation Foundation (BCCF) has partnered with DFO, Kwakiutl First Nation (KFN) and the Northern Vancouver Island Salmonid Enhancement Association (NWISEA) to monitor water flows through spring and summer and study the migration habits of sockeye in the river on their way to the lake.

James Craig, BCCF Project Manager said, "Stream flow is a critical factor affecting fish production of stream-rearing species like coho and Chinook salmon, steelhead and cutthroat trout, and Dolly Varden char. On the Quatse, fisheries managers also wish to consider adult sockeye migrating to a headwater lake during the early summer period, and how storage releases can assist that migration." The project began May 16, 2011 with the installation of flow monitoring stations in the river and fish counters at the storage weir. Fish sampling gets underway May 22, 2011.

Craig said, "Recent summer droughts experienced on east coast Vancouver Island streams (2002, 2003, 2006, 2009) have accentuated the need to improve summer base flows where cost-effective storage projects exist." Craig added, "Similar projects have been proposed or completed in many Vancouver Island watersheds, including Cameron Lake where a similar control weir enhances summer water flows in the Little Qualicum River."

Year one of the Quatse feasibility study will document water flows at two locations and sockeye migration from the mouth to the lake. DFO has been closely enumerating Quatse sockeye since 2006, estimating escapements of 750-2,200 fish. This year DFO will attempt to apply 150 PIT (passive integrated transponder) tags to sockeye seined in the lower river. The fish are then detected by an array of installed antennae in the river and at the weir's fishway. The goal of the three year study is to help fisheries managers determine the minimum flow required for Quatse sockeye to reach the lake, so that as much storage as possible can be made available to benefit wild stream-rearing salmon, trout and char in the river through the summer low flow period.

Project funding of \$10,000 is being provided by Living Rivers – Georgia Basin/Vancouver Island (LR-GB/VI), with support or monitoring assistance from DFO, KFN and NWISEA and InStream Fisheries Research Inc.

KFN Fisheries Coordinator, Chrissy Chen supports the study. She said, "Kwakiutl have a vested interest in the health of the Quatse sockeye run."

LR-GB/VI is striving to help south coast communities meet the objectives of British Columbia's new Water Plan, 'Living Water Smart', announced in June 2008. Living Water Smart recognizes the threats of climate change to salmon and steelhead populations in coastal watersheds, including more intense floods and more frequent and severe droughts. Consequently, with direct funding from Living Rivers and its partners a series of water conservation projects have been launched since 2006 to deal with this new reality.

Senior Fisheries Biologist, Craig Wightman said, "Along with key partners, Living Rivers has begun the process of investigating and implementing water storage feasibility options in over 30 watersheds in Georgia Basin that will benefit not only fish populations, but also the communities that depend on these resources."

Added Wightman, "The Quatse River project is all about water storage for fish and ecosystem sustainability. I believe this and similar projects represent one of the most effective applications of BC's Living Rivers' funding."

Media is invited to attend project sites for photo opportunities when technicians are available.

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