

For Immediate Release
2008LR-GB/VI-0006
July 8, 2008

Salmon and Steelhead in the Little Qualicum River on Vancouver Island will have more water to swim in this summer.

QUALICUM BEACH: Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) has been operating a small weir at the outlet of Cameron Lake, in the headwaters of the river, since 1978. Lake storage was historically used to provide fall migration flows for adult Chinook salmon, which supply brood stock for the Little Qualicum Hatchery.

The British Columbia Conservation Foundation (BCCF), in partnership with DFO and the Ministry of Environment (MoE), recently re-constructed the weir to improve lake storage and augment flows to the river during dry summers and falls.

Feasibility assessments began in 2003 to determine if increased lake storage was possible. After widespread public and agency consultations led by BCCF staff, a modified strategy to achieve the new storage target was developed in early 2006. James Craig, BCCF Project Manager said, "DFO applied for a new water license in 2005 which required a number of studies pertaining to environmental issues, consultation with BC Parks, consultation with private property holders and cabin lease holders, and consultations with lower river water users."

The fishway at the weir was also redesigned during the re-construction phase. "The existing fish passage structure was identified as an upstream migration barrier for juvenile trout during most of the low flow season. The new fishway is designed to pass larger juveniles at all operational stages and young-of-the-year at some discharges, leading to improved recruitment to the Cameron Lake sport fishery," added Craig.

A pre-fabricated aluminum fishway and gate valve were built and installed during the summer of 2006. The gate is designed to release up to 2.3 m³/s at full storage, and can be adjusted to regulate flow in the river.

The feasibility, design and construction costs totaled \$342,000. Project funding was provided by Living Rivers – Georgia Basin/Vancouver Island program, Pacific Salmon Commission-Southern Fund, Habitat Conservation Trust Fund and the BC Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure.

Craig Wightman, BCCF Senior Fisheries Biologist, said recent summer droughts (2002, 2003, 2006) in east coast Vancouver Island streams have accentuated the need to improve summer base flows where cost-effective projects can be attained. Wightman added, "Similar projects have been recommended or employed in many Vancouver Island watersheds, including the nearby Englishman and Big Qualicum rivers. Water storage and improved flow management will be strategically important responses communities can take to the challenge of climate change in the future."

Mel Sheng, DFO's Senior Habitat Restoration Biologist, said Little Qualicum stream productivity is projected to increase substantially. "More summer rearing habitat will lead to greater smolt numbers, which should lead to increased escapements of Coho, Chinook and steelhead. All resource users, First Nations, commercial and recreational will benefit from an overall increase in the river's salmon productivity."

The project has been endorsed by local First Nations. "Qualicum First Nation is in support of stream productivity as well as the sustainability of our streams," said Councilor Darlene Wells, Qualicum First Nation.

Effective June 2008, DFO has been granted a new water license to store an additional 1,355 acre-feet on Cameron Lake. This summer, the additional storage will be used for the first time to augment flows in the river during the dry summer and early fall seasons to improve downstream habitat and rearing conditions. As in the past, the stop logs in the weir will be removed each October until the following spring.

The new storage will raise lake levels an additional 15 cm in early summer and gradually decline to 35 cm lower than usual by late September. Summer lake levels will remain much lower than that which naturally occurs during fall/winter major storm events.

Thorough monitoring of the new operational protocol for the weir will be carried out by BCCF and DFO staff. The results will be available late next fall and provided to lakeshore residents and other stakeholders.

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