

SEHAB October 2024: Southern Interior Roundtable Report

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Things haven't changed much from last year as the southern interior has faced fires, flooding, drought and landslides in the past few years, so the salmon and their habitats are constantly being challenged as well as the stewardship community who are often rural landowners impacted as well by the devastation created.

While we face many watershed management challenges, we have lost stewardship groups formed in the 90's under provincial programs like Forest and Fisheries Renewal and through Fisheries and Oceans Canada's, Habitat Conservation Stewardship Program that helped rural communities organize and address issues impacting salmon and their habitat.

Things have changed over time though, with first nations capacity involvement managing the resource increasing with most of the remediation work being completed partnering with Fisheries and Oceans Canada and working directly with landowners often through FRISP. We have new NGO's being formed like the Nicola Restoration Committee to address the flooding in the Nicola collaboratively, but these organizations are not engaging volunteers so much as stakeholders. Groups like the Salmon River Roundtable simple ran out of steam as DFO and Provincial government curtailed engagement here in the southern interior and focused more with first nations interests.

That doesn't mean that stewardship has died but has changed with first nations taking the lead on developing remediation projects versus DFO and community.

NGO's like my program, FRISP or Environmental Farm Plan have taken the lead helping individual agricultural landowners or groups of landowners complete remediation through providing consultation often linking directly with first nations when developing remediation plans. My new volunteers or stewards are the several hundred landowners and contractors who are stepping up and are helping out due to their personal desire to help protect salmon as they go about their daily business. While a landowner may want to stop the rivers migration to stop his hayfield from being eroded, if he takes the approach of working with fellow stakeholders to naturalize or remediate the riparian corridor and improve the health of the river long term is stewardship!

Good news: Also, key has been the support of our small restoration unit here in the interior and several other staff with enforcement and compliance making individual efforts given challenging times.

Examples of this:

- Good news going forward is the hiring of new staff by DFO and the Province focusing on habitat, water, drought and flooding. Hopefully this will allow us to complete more of these types of projects listed above as previous individual staff going out of their way to help allow these to happen.

- Drought has been the major concern of late but we have seen the Province step up on hosting weekly drought calls with the irrigation community and consultants have been brought in to help with developing scheduling. The focus being to establish protocols between irrigation license holders to maintain conservation flows for a number of watersheds told to shut down irrigation last year causing conflict with RCMP becoming involved after death threats to water staff. I know DFO has been meeting with the Province on drought which is positive that the new staff allow this participation.
- In the Bessette system we have a new Society established by rural landowner. Bessette Creek Sustainability Society is focused on maintaining conservation flows in the system. They are looking on finding solutions through cooperation with other stakeholders.
- The Bonaparte Restoration Committee has completed a number of unique projects involving beaver analogs partnering with BCWF.

The bad news:

- Bad news is the apparent rebuilding process and hiring of new staff has not helped me or the my fellow stewards on the ground as we see DFO try to reinvent their approach to Wild Salmon Policy management relying on first Nations and NGO's to manage on the ground work rehabilitation.. Those of us who have been working on conservation and protection through rural stewardship groups for the past few decades feel we have been abandoned by DFO!
- We are dealing with challenging times going forward here in the interior with climate change creating instability with weather patterns, ultimately impacting water quality and quantities for salmon in our rivers and streams. Add accumulated negative human impacts and our salmon are in trouble, and we don't have capacity to address them all, even with new government staff and first nation capacity building.
- Drought has brought new meaning to the old saying "whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting over" here in the southern interior as water license holders on some critical salmon streams have refused to turn off or reduce extraction levels when ordered by the Province this last summer due to extreme low flows. This has led to enforcement action and threats to provincial staff. Going forward we will need greater dialogue to resolve these conflicts through more effective communication by both DFO and the Province towards license holders on why conservation flows need to be protected while the license holders need to better understand their water rights their license actually provides and the responsibilities. Who the messenger is and how he presents the need for conservation is critical for buy in.

Going forward I'm still optimistic that we can make a difference because thank goodness our salmon are resilient, and we have a lot of individual stewards who care here in the interior.

Lee Hesketh