

Prince George Public Forum Summaries

Date: September 23, 2010
Time: 6:30 p.m. – 8:45 p.m. (approximately)
Venue: The Ramada, Prince George
Presentations: 8

Welcome

Elder Carl Frederick welcomed the Cohen Commission to the Lheidli T'enneh territory.

David Loewen

David Loewen spoke about his vision of sustainability for Fraser River sockeye salmon and the need for citizen participation. Salmon are an integral part of many First Nations' societies, and Mr Loewen suggested moving away from blaming others towards more cooperation to ensure the sustainability of sockeye. He said the annual salmon return was once as large as 160 million, and questioned DFO's management of sockeye, noting that instead of managing according to the Wild Salmon Policy, they manage to a subset of 19 stocks (that do not correspond to conservation units) in 4 aggregates. He drew into question the Fraser River Sockeye Spawning Initiative, and noted that the only ecosystem based management tool is management adjustments (based on river flow and temperature). To move forward, Mr Loewen suggested that DFO must engage in complex systems, starting with conservation, the looking at entropy. He suggested the Cohen Commission consider work by Reimchen, Bilby and Cederholm on how that energy dissipates through the environment. He asked the commission to look to the communities who are on the rivers for answers, saying that to have a truly ecosystem-based approach, the precautionary approach must be implemented, keeping in mind that preservation is cheaper than repair.

Pete Erickson

Peter Erickson spoke about the background, history and qualities that First Nations have always looked for in assuring sustained liveability in their territory and stewardship values they enshrine to ensure their survival. He gave a brief history of the way his community has looked after salmon, as stewards of the environment, keeping a watchful eye on the habitat to which the salmon returned, cooperating to prevent excess pressure from being exerted on the fishery in any one area. Mr Erickson spoke about technology coming full circle, from the First Nations being banned from using weirs in 1912, to DFO now using them. He said DFO is unwilling to listen to First Nations experience to inform management, and this year only 300 fish were allocated to his community. He argued that salmon should be managed to be informed by traditional knowledge, with fisheries moved inland to ensure that fish are allowed to spawn. He noted that millions of dollars are spent on people who talk about fish, but no money is spent on making sure that the salmon have habitat to which they can return. He concluded by saying that without this, First Nations children will lack the very base of their culture.

Tanis Reynolds

Tanis Reynolds discussed her graduate thesis which focused on First Nations and salmon. She said that although lifestyles have changed, salmon remain an important element of First Nations culture. Her vision for Fraser River sockeye does not involve commercial exploitation, but rather taking care of the resource to produce the most valuable use of the fish. Ms Reynolds noted that a key element in this involves keeping salmon habitat clean. She likened the current situation to ecocide, akin to genocide, and said that major threats include salmon farms and the Enbridge pipeline project. She suggested that the salmon must be managed cooperatively to ensure proper harvesting methods, and that First Nations voices must be heard. She said that First Nations had rules for harvesting based on conservation and sustainability, and they want to be a part of the solution.

Geraldine Thomas-Flurer

Geraldine Thomas-Flurer spoke of how the First Nations depend on Fraser River salmon to sustain their people, life and culture. She noted that the 2001 declaration on water was a commitment by indigenous people to raise their voice in solidarity to protect water, to care for all of creation and preserve water to preserve life. She stated that water is a basic human right for all peoples, for Fraser River sockeye and for all other beings. Ms. Thomas-Flurer noted her concern that water is threatened by the tar sands development and infrastructure. She said that the Cohen Commission needs to consider reasonably foreseeable development impacts that will impact Fraser River sockeye, such as the Enbridge pipeline project, noting that toxic effects of a spill would be felt for hundreds of kilometres. She explained that in her language, the word for groundwater supply directly translates to ‘underwater fish supply.’ First Nations’ laws have always seen to it that salmon are protected, she said, and she encouraged the Cohen Commission to take a holistic view considering the impacts of potential future projects.

Sharolise Baker

Sharolise Baker talked about habitat risks and requirements for rebuilding. She noted that it is important to show the different habitat used throughout the sockeye life cycle, including rivers and streams, lakes and the Fraser River. Ms Baker said she has witnessed excavators in the lake digging trenches to put in water lines, while their impacts are not monitored. She advocated for shifting focus from determining who is and isn’t catching fish to focusing more closely on habitat Ms. Baker suggested that a complete moratorium on salmon is required until salmon rebuild to their pre-Hells’ Gate slide levels.

Marcel Shepert (Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance)

Marcel Shepert suggested that the Cohen Commissions’ task not only requires a scientific perspective, but is also inextricably linked to First Nations’ traditional ecological knowledge. He stated that First Nations have constitutionally held rights that must be respected, and that DFO should be receptive to this knowledge and should work out new processes, based on consensus and collaboration. He argued that DFO’s policies and practices should be reviewed to this end, and that international obligations, provincial interest in tourism and internal influences must be examined. Mr Shepert suggested that interactions of impacts, including cumulative impacts, need to be considered. He noted that rebuilding needs to include principles and approaches ensuring conservation, collaborative co-management, shared decision-making, and accounting for the mixed stock aggregate and biodiversity. He suggested

that the idea is to have a true paradigm shift to reorient fishery management to ensure biodiversity and sustainability, and international examples of where problems have been mitigated and turned around should be considered. Mr Shepert noted that DFO must comply with their management and decision-making structures, and recommendations for rebuilding must be collaboratively developed.

Anne Ketto

Anne Ketto said that communication is a serious issue in DFO management. As an example, she noted that two years ago a tailings-pond wall collapsed releasing toxins and that last spring over three million salmon smolts were found dead in the Stellako River, but DFO never reported what had happened to the local First Nations. Ms. Ketto also spoke of her community's frustration with DFO management, saying her community has their own fisheries management plan, they are attuned to fluctuations in fish numbers, and give up fishing to ensure adequate numbers of fish reach their spawning grounds. However, she noted that this can be frustrating because DFO lets licensed fishermen operate. She asked the Cohen Commission to encourage the DFO to open up their communication doors, and in particular get back to her community about what killed the smolt and what chemicals were released into the river.

George M. George Senior

George M. George Senior noted that in his language the word for the Fraser River means the returns of salmon every year. Before the forced 1911 agreement, Mr. George's people used a weir system to fish, but after this agreement, his community were given nets with wrong sized mesh, then fishing twine, and later nothing at all. He said they were promised food, but their people starved. He said they were promised a school, and they got a residential school. Mr. George noted that his people lived on the resources of the land, and salmon was a great food source until the First Nations started being blamed for the run failures. He suggested that the way to save salmon is to take care of the water and look at who is polluting the river. He said he used to boil river-water for tea, but no longer dares to do so. He suggested that someone has to be the spokesman for the lakes, rivers and lands, that it is the only way to save the fish resources. According to him, the problems are around the coast where there are fish farms and commercial and sports fishermen who take a large portion of the sockeye runs. He concluded by encouraging everyone to speak up.