

## BRIEFING NOTE FOR THE MINISTER

**ISSUE:** Salmon stock status and outlook for fisheries in 2000 in the Pacific Region.

### BACKGROUND

The commercial catches and value of salmon for B.C. fisheries reached a historical high of more than 100,000 tonnes and \$400 million in landed value in the late 1980s (figure 1). In recent years the catches and value of salmon have declined dramatically, with the total landed value for all salmon species for the 1999 season expected to be about \$20 million. This recent decline is due to several factors, including reduced marine survival rates due to changes in ocean conditions, lower value resulting from steadily increasing competition for market share from salmon produced by aquaculture, and in some cases, over-fishing, with non-selective harvest methods.

In response the Department has initiated major changes in the salmon resource and harvest industry. Extensive policy changes have been initiated under the Department's "New Directions", including adoption of a more risk-averse, conservation-based approach to salmon production and management, restructuring of the commercial harvest sector through voluntary retirement of approximately half of the commercial salmon fishing licences, diversification of the remaining commercial fishing fleet, and a requirement for all three harvest sectors to develop and implement much more selective fishing methods. The fisheries opportunities for salmon in 2000 will reflect all these changes. The following sections ~~summarizes~~summarise the information currently available on salmon stock status and development of the management plan for salmon fisheries for the 2000 season.

### Status of Salmon Stocks:

#### Coho

Assessments are ongoing but preliminary data indicate that coho spawning escapements in 1999 generally improved in northern B.C. Escapements in many portions of the Skeena River reached the highest levels observed in decades. The increased escapements in the Skeena should result in improved return rates and possibly reduced conservation concerns beginning in 2001. However, in 2000 coho returns to the upper Skeena are expected to be low, due to the very poor spawning escapement in the 1997 brood year. However the returns are not expected to be so

(Port Alberni) Salmon  
2000 Port Alberni

low as to preclude sockeye and pink salmon fisheries and possibly even some low impact coho fisheries. Final forecasts will not be available until late December, 1999 or early January, 2000.

In southern B.C. coho spawning escapements generally remained poor in 1999. It is unlikely that escapements of the critical Thompson River coho will improve until marine survival rates increase.

### **Southern B.C. Sockeye**

Returns of Fraser sockeye on the year 2000 cycle are historically the lowest of the ~~four cycle~~ four-cycle years (figure 2). The very preliminary forecast return for 2000 is 5 million sockeye, which is greater than the recent average return. However, when comparing the 1999 forecast (8.2 million) to actual (3.6 million) returns this might be a signal of well below average ocean survivals and unprecedented low return of jacks (3 year old) sockeye in 1999 may signal a return much lower than the forecast level. 5 million in 2000. Average to below average returns are expected in 2000 for the sockeye return to the west coast of Vancouver Island (Barkley Sound).

### **Northern and Central B.C. Sockeye**

Returns of sockeye to the Nass and Skeena rivers are expected to be average or below average. The extremely poor return of sockeye to Rivers Inlet and Smith Inlet in 1999 suggests that the return in 2000 may also be very poor. Additional Continued conservation measures will likely be required to protect and rebuild these stocks. Commercial fishing closures have been in place for Rivers and Smith Inlets for a number of years. A conservation intervention team has been established to identify options to address extreme conservation concerns for these stocks.

### **Chinook**

Very poor escapements of chinook to the ~~west coast~~ West Coast of Vancouver Island (WCVI) in 1999 raise severe conservation concerns for 2000 for WCVI chinook and potentially chinook originating from the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Returns of WCVI chinook are expected to approach new record lows in 2000 (Figure 3). Returns of chinook to northern B.C. and the Fraser River are expected to be similar to recent levels.

### Chum

~~Below a~~ Average returns are expected for chum returning to the North Coast, Central Coast, ~~and Below~~ average returns are expected for southern B.C. (~~confirm validity of this statement for all areas~~)

### Outlook for Salmon Fisheries in 2000

The outlook for salmon fisheries in 2000 is generally poor for all harvest sectors. The ~~abundances~~ abundance of all species and most stocks of salmon are expected to be low, and very restrictive management measures will be required in most areas of B.C. When the strong coho conservation measures were implemented in 1998 the Department announced that these measures would likely be required for several coho cycles (6-8 years). In 2000 the low coho returns expected for the Skeena and Thompson ~~Rivers~~ will likely require very restrictive fisheries management measures, given very low spawning levels in the major parent year (1997) in the north and central coast and continuing poor marine survival rates in southern B.C. The low expected returns of WCVI chinook in 2000 will also likely require additional conservation measures in all fisheries and areas that could impact WCVI chinook, including northern B.C. (Area 1, 2W), and the WCVI during August and September.

Where surpluses of salmon are identified in-season in 2000, harvest opportunities will be considered and permitted only where the fishery can be conducted in a manner consistent with achieving conservation objectives and the "New Directions" policy framework, including the new Allocation Policy. It is anticipated that most of the harvest opportunities in 2000 will require use of fishing gear and methods that are highly selective. The only exceptions will be where fisheries are stock specific with respect to area and timing or where there are not specific conservation concerns such as with hatchery stocks.

Some limited salmon harvest opportunities are anticipated in 2000 and are ~~summarized~~ summarised as follows:

### Aboriginal

In general it is anticipated that normal opportunities will be provided for most First Nations to harvest salmon for food, social and ceremonial (FSC; Section 35) purposes. In some cases the harvest opportunities will likely need to be restricted to only selective fishing methods due to conservation concerns for specific non-target stocks (e.g. early run timing sockeye and Thompson River coho in the Fraser

River. ~~Modest~~ Limited opportunities for Pilot Sales fisheries and ESSR (Escapement Surplus to Spawning Requirements) fisheries are ~~also~~ expected.

In southern B.C. First Nations will likely have normal opportunities to harvest Mid-Summer run sockeye for FSC purposes ~~in the lower and mid Fraser River~~, but very limited or no opportunities for Early Stuart, Early Summer and Late Runs ~~in the upper river (due to conservation concerns for the Early Stuart stock)~~. First Nations will ~~also~~ likely be permitted normal harvest opportunities for Barkley Sound sockeye for both FSC and pilot sales purposes. Limited coho opportunities are expected in terminal areas on the WCVI, with retention of incidental by-catch of coho permitted in most other areas (i.e. no directed fisheries). The exception will be in the Fraser River where closures will likely be required to conserve Thompson River coho. Normal pink fishing opportunities for First Nations will be available in Johnstone Strait and the Mainland Inlets. Normal chum and chinook fishing opportunities are anticipated in all-most South Coast/Fraser River areas. The exception to this will be in the terminal areas of the WCVI for chinook, where strong conservation measures will likely be required. The Pilot Sales fishery for Somass River chinook may have to be reduced or cancelled.

In northern and central B.C. the harvest opportunities for First Nations for both FSC purposes and ESSR fisheries are expected to be similar to previous years ~~and ESSR fisheries will likely be similar to 1999~~. The main exception ~~main exception~~ will be Rivers Inlet and Smith Inlet. Due to the very poor returns of sockeye to these systems in 1999 the intention is to negotiate no sockeye fishing (unless stocks return in enough strength) in Area 10 (Smith Inlet) and a reduction in catch for Owikeno (Rivers Inlet) from 3000 to 500 sockeye.

#### Recreational

In general the recreational fishing opportunities in 2000 will likely be similar to 1999, with some additional restrictions required to protect WCVI chinook and central coast sockeye.

In southern B.C. ~~normal~~ opportunities to harvest Fraser sockeye are expected in Johnstone Strait, Georgia Strait and in the Fraser River. However, Early season non-retention (and in some areas, closure) measures may have to be taken to protect weak early- timed Fraser sockeye stocks (Early Stuart and Early Summer). Normal opportunities in Barkley Sound are expected for Somass River sockeye. Limited coho opportunities could be ~~are~~ expected in terminal areas on the WCVI, with non-retention of coho in most other areas (i.e. no directed fisheries). Special conservation measures similar to 1999 will likely again be required in 2000 in Juan

de Fuca Strait, WCVI and in the Fraser River to conserve Thompson River coho. Some areas (e.g. Johnstone Strait) may also have limited hatchery mark coho retention fisheries. Normal pink, chum and chinook opportunities are expected in all areas with the exception of the WCVI where significant restrictions (possibly complete closure) will likely be required to protect weak returning chinook stocks.

In northern and central B.C. recreational fishing opportunities in 2000 will likely be similar to 1999, with the possible exception of a more flexible approach in the red zones (depending on advice from PSARC); significant reductions in fishing pressure are required ~~a possible closure to protect for chinook in the vicinity of the Queen Charlotte Islands and Langara, and a reduction of bag limits for chinook in Rivers Inlet.~~ There will also likely be a complete closure of sockeye fishing in Rivers and Smith Inlets.

### **Commercial**

The outlook for commercial salmon fisheries in 2000 is generally poor for all gear types and licence areas. Fishing opportunities and average landed value per vessel, will likely be similar to 1999 for most licence areas. The further reduction in fleet size resulting from the third round of the voluntary licence retirement program is expected to provide some improvement in average incomes. However, the key factors in the economics for the 2000 season for the commercial net sectors (gillnet and seine) will be the actual strength of the return for Fraser River sockeye in southern B.C. and Skeena sockeye in northern B.C. Even moderate increases in the abundance of these stocks could substantially improve the landed value for salmon in 2000. ~~The key factor that will determine opportunities for the northern commercial troll fleet will be the severity of the management measures required to conserve WCVI chinook. Based on the information currently available the northern troll fleet will likely have little or no fishing opportunities in 2000.~~

In southern B.C., depending on the actual strength of the Fraser sockeye return in 2000, harvest opportunities could range from limited to none for the two southern troll (licence Areas G and H) and gillnet fleets (Areas D and E) and the seine fleet (Area B). The Area D gillnet and Area G troll fleets are expected to ~~also have~~ limited fishing opportunities for Barkley Sound sockeye. No directed coho fisheries are expected for south coast commercial fishing fleets in 2000 and fisheries for other species will be subject to strict conservation measures and selective harvest practices to protect south coast (including Thompson River) coho stocks. No ~~mainland inlet~~ pink or Study Area chum opportunities are ~~anticipated but~~ anticipated but in-season assessments could identify limited fishing opportunities. ~~Normal~~ Chum opportunities for the Area D and E gillnet and Area

B seine fleets are ~~anticipated~~ expected to be below average on the WCVI. No commercial opportunities to harvest chinook are anticipated. The only exception to this could be on the WCVI where a modest Area G chinook troll fishery may be possible in the Spring and Fall months, targeting chinook that do not originate from local WCVI stocks.

In northern and central B.C. limited commercial net fishing (Area A seine and Area C gillnet) will likely take place on Skeena and Nass sockeye, QCI chum and pink, and central coast chum and pink. The northern commercial troll fleet (Area F) will likely not open ~~be closed~~ for the entire season due to ~~the expected low abundance of conservation concerns for coho, and chinook, and the (for the first time) inability to access Fraser River sockeye under the new Allocation Policy.~~

## KEY ISSUES

- WCVI chinook: Severe management measures will be required to protect returning WCVI stocks. Restriction of the FSC and Pilot Sales fisheries for chinook by the Opetchesaht and Tseshaht First Nations will likely be required. These bands may challenge these measures, particularly if there is any harvest of Somass chinook anywhere else on the B.C. coast. The recreational community will likely challenge these measures. Severe ~~Any~~ restrictions of the recreational fishery for chinook in the north coast (especially the Queen Charlotte Islands and Langara Island) to protect WCVI chinook ~~will likely~~ could result in strong resistance and criticism.
- Coho management approach: Coho conservation measures will be required to protect south coast coho stocks, especially Thompson River coho. All sectors will challenge a "zero mortality" management regime and will be looking for a coho management strategy based instead on some minimum harvest rate or incidental mortality rate approach.
- In the event the Fraser River sockeye return is low, the impact of little or no commercial fisheries for the third year in a row will have extreme economic and social consequences for the southern commercial fishing fleets.
- Early release of fishing plans: All sectors want fishing plans announced as early as possible. In particular, the recreational fishery is looking for release of the Tidal Waters Sport Fishing Guide by April 1, 2000.

## KEY DECISIONS

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2000 Port Alberni

Several key decisions are required from the Minister in order to develop the management strategy and complete the detailed fishing plans for the 2000 salmon season. Some of these key decisions are listed below. A separate "Decision Memorandum" is currently being prepared by the Pacific Region and will soon be forwarded to the Minister that describes each of these key issues in more detail.

1. "Zero mortality" objective for ~~Thompson River~~ and upper Skeena River coho. A decision is required on whether this management approach will be continued or modified for 2000 reflecting the sharply improved freshwater and ocean survival trends.
2. "Zero mortality" objective for Thompson River coho. A decision is required to maintain the management approach for 2000 reflecting the continuation of the low marine survival rates observed in recent years.
- ~~2-3.~~ "Red Zone" designation for coho conservation. A decision is required on whether red zones will continue or be changed in 2000.
- ~~3-4.~~ Selective mark fisheries. A decision is required on whether any selective hatchery mark recreational fisheries for coho will be permitted in 2000.
- ~~4-5.~~ First Nations priority for achieving salmon allocations for FSC (Section 35) purposes. A decision is required on the levels of incidental mortality of non-target salmon species and stocks that the recreational and commercial harvest sectors will be permitted before First Nations have actually achieved their full FSC requirements for these species or stocks.
- ~~5-6.~~ Risk to protected stocks in mixed stock fisheries. A decision is required on the maximum allowable proportion of protected species or stocks that can be permitted in mixed stock fisheries. [Brent: I don't understand the difference between this and #1. Could you provide an example?]
- ~~6-7.~~ Selective fisheries. A decision is required on the general approach that will be taken in 2000 for selective fisheries in all three harvest sectors.

#### NEXT STEPS

The anticipated schedule for development and release of the salmon conservation and management plans for 2000 is ~~summarized~~summarised below:

- Prepare Decision Memorandum for Minister by end of December 1999.
- ~~Complete~~Initiate consultations with stakeholder groups to discuss 1999 fishery reviews and provide an outlook for 2000 by January 2000.
- Provide technical briefing to media on the preliminary results of the 1999 fishing season and outlook for 2000 in January 2000.
- Complete analyses of 1999 catch and escapement data by February 2000.

- Confirm final stock forecasts for 2000 based on PSARC advice by March 2000.
- ~~Develop draft Integrated Fisheries Management Plans (IFMPs) for southern B.C., northern and central B.C., and Yukon salmon for 2000 by end of March 2000.~~
- ~~Complete~~ Continue additional consultation with stakeholders once forecasts are complete (April 2000).
- Decisions and release in 2000 of additional key policy documents currently under development (Improved Decision Making, Selective Fishing, etc.)
- Complete consultations and negotiations with First Nations by April 2000.
- Timely release of information to stakeholders and the public during the January to June 2000 period as soon as information is available and decisions are made.

## COMMUNICATIONS APPROACH

Athana/Deb: Perhaps you folks might wish to consider revising this to reflect the final "Next Steps" approach when it is finalized.

In recent years, Fisheries and Oceans Canada has prepared ministerial announcements of the salmon plan – usually delivered in June. Even more recently, the annual salmon plan has been prefaced by a post-season review – usually delivered by departmental officials in January. A somewhat different approach is being recommended for 2000.

The first step of the proposed approach is a December press release outlining what is anticipated and known to date about the 2000 salmon season. This press release would capture the information outlined above.

As per 1997 and 1998, a post-season review is being proposed for the 1999 salmon fishery. As a second component of the proposed approach, the post-season review is recommended for the third week of January, 2000.

In combination with this post-season review, a detailed forecast for 2000 is proposed as a third component of the recommended approach. This forecast would be based on the information outlined above, and would be combined with an EXPLICIT discussion of next steps. In other words, the media would be briefed on the fact that there will not be a "2000 salmon plan announcement," but instead there will be regular updates as more information becomes available. That would include, for example, a technical briefing after the spring PSARC process and other briefings as information becomes available that changes the original forecast.

(Port Alberni) Salmon  
2000 Port Alberni



The goal of the January announcement is two-fold:

1. To communicate the uncertainty surrounding the 2000 fishery. This will require very plain language and simple messages.
2. To provide the early announcement demanded by many stakeholders. They in particular will need to understand the uncertainty and variability of the proposed fishing plan.

The announcement will be built on the growing public understanding of uncertainty in the oceans. Most recently, an article by Mark Hume in the National Post captured the various phenomena affecting Pacific salmon. The article was a testament to the growing sophistication of the public's understanding of salmon – and the growing tendency away from simplistic explanations of why some salmon stocks have collapsed.

It will be important not to cast the January announcement as a fishing plan, primarily because of sensitivities around First Nations fisheries. A clear message would be communicated that consultations with all sectors – particularly First Nations – will be undertaken in the following weeks.

Emphasis will be placed on ensuring there are regular press briefings throughout April and May with updates on all relevant developments. This will help reinforce with the public/media that there will not be a “2000 salmon plan announcement.”

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2000 Port Alberni**