

COVER STORY

Fraser Sockeye 2010: the bottom of the slippery slope

Alan Haig-Brown

By October 2010 the excitement over the 34 million-fish return of Fraser River sockeye, the biggest since 1913, was shifting to celebrations of the massed red fish on spawning grounds. From galley tables to Internet discussions coastal fishermen began to analyze the management of the summer's fishery. The size of the returns has inflated the already significant concerns among the public and independent fishermen regarding the privatisation and corporate concentration of the fishery resources in BC waters. It could be said that the bottom had been reached on a slippery slope that began with 1970s era limited entry provisions.

After three years with virtually no commercial fishery on the Fraser sockeye stocks, the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) predicted a large return of eleven million sockeye for 2010. The Fraser system is actually a diverse collection of separate runs of sockeye salmon to tributary rivers like the Adams, Chilco, Quesnel, Stewart and others.

The returns of 2010 would include the peak run in the four-year sockeye cycle for the mighty Adams River stock. Prospects for other runs on the Fraser were also promising. By early August, test sets by seines in Upper Johnstone Straits, along the northeast coast of Vancouver Island, were showing catches of thousands where previous years had only caught a few hundred fish. By mid August, the DFO was allowing the Johnstone Straits to be open to seines for four days. On August 15, a test set captured 13,000 sockeye. Comparisons were being made with the legendary returns of 1958.

Salmon are caught by three gear types; gillnet, troll and seine. The gear types have been traditional rivals on allocation of salmon catches and fishing areas. Seiners have been favoured by processors due to the catch capacity and efficiency. The gillnets had priority in the river estuaries and shared the passages and channels with the seiners and trollers. Trollers, the most independent of fishermen, claimed the highest quality catches with the least controlled by the processors. The advent of limited entry in the 1970s was intended to freeze the fleet



BOOM: The 34 million-fish return to Fraser River is the biggest since 1913

size. Until the 1990s, each gear type was free to fish the whole coast, on the purchase of an inexpensive license.

By the 2010 salmon season the BC coast, for seiners, had been divided in two with northern and southern sectors. For gillnetters and trollers, it was similar with the addition of the west and northeast coast of Vancouver Island as a third area for trollers. Gillnetters could choose between the north coast or waters adjacent to Vancouver Island or the Fraser estuary and Gulf of Georgia. Some fishermen and fishing companies purchased second licenses so that their boats could continue to fish the whole coast. As a result, for 2010, 107 seiners were licensed to fish the northern coast and 169 were licensed for the south coast area. Gillnet numbers were 659 north coast, 359 Vancouver Island and 391 Fraser Estuary and

approaches. As the massive run of Fraser sockeye began to pour into Johnstone Straits in August the 169 seine boats licensed to fish them could have provided 845 short-term but good-paying jobs – a huge boon to depressed coastal fishing communities. With two or three to a boat the trollers and gillnetters would also contribute their share of jobs. But the introduction of transferable quotas to the limited entry fishery would severely restrict the benefit to coastal fishermen.

Early in the run, seiners and gillnetters were given longer weekly openings. Trollers, at least those licensed to fish the waters inside Vancouver Island, had been given individual and transferable quotas (ITQ) prior to the season so were not limited by time.

Limited entry, with its restriction on the creation of new licenses, had dramatically

increased the value of a licensed boat. It also led to old boats being retired in favour of efficient new boats. Most of the seiners in the fleet are modern aluminum, steel and fiberglass boats built since limited entry was introduced in the 1970s. With hydraulically operated drums, good power and the technology to take advantage of this power, they are extremely efficient fishing machines. Designed for an open Olympic-style fishery, the more sets that the competent skipper made, the more fish the boat would catch. These boats fished herring as well as salmon and in both fisheries speed of setting and recovering the net was paramount.

Quotas in which the total allowable catch (TAC) is divided evenly between the licensed boats in a limited-entry fishery were introduced to the herring seine fishery in the late 1990s.

They have been used only in limited cases for the salmon seine sector. However, with millions of sockeye moving south through Johnstone Straits there was legitimate concern that allowing unlimited fishing by the 169 seine licenses over a specific number of days could lead to catching in excess of the TAC. As the in-season estimates of the returns grew from 11 million, to 20 million, 25 million and finally over 30 million the challenge of tailoring the catch to the returns was complex. This was especially true in controlling the effort of the highly efficient seiners.

Target

Trollers, who fish more for quality than quantity, have been fishing quotas for several years. Kathy Scarfo, the representative of the 164 West Coast Vancouver Island Troll fleet, understood that at eleven million sockeye there were not enough fish for the West Coast troll fleet to target a quota of sockeye. The west coast troll fleet would concentrate on Coho and Chinook salmon. However as the in-season estimates were increased, the west coast trollers were ignored. As Scarfo explains it, "As the run increased, we should have kicked in. DFO decided they would not make an in-season change."

"Isn't that a part of management?" she asked rhetorically, adding, "They then did make changes to accommodate the (seine) ITQ fishery."

The shift from an Olympic-style fishery to an ITQ was implemented for seiners as the returns continued to strengthen through mid-August. However, as Scarfo pointed out, the Canadian system doesn't restrict quota to a particular vessel (IVQ) but favours the transferable quota (ITQ) that allows quota from one license or boat to be "stacked" on another. This is benefits a corporation like the Canadian Fishing Company that owns many licensed boats and controls others through debt contracts. It also works well for the government managers as a few boats owned by a limited number of stakeholders are more easily managed than a large number of licenses boats owned and fished by a large number of citizens. With enough concentration of ownership of the fishing privilege, management decisions can be made with a couple of phone