



North Coast
Steelhead Alliance | British Columbia, Canada



For immediate release

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Angler Conservation Groups Echo Call for Industry/DFO Change

Vancouver, B.C.--The recent disclosure by B.C. fisheries environmental groups of some 1.7 million pounds of north coast chum salmon “discards” from commercial fisheries seeking pink salmon is simply the tip of the wasteful by-catch iceberg say the Steelhead Society of B.C, the North Coast Steelhead Alliance and the B.C. Federation of Fly Fishers. Steelhead are also an unfortunate part of this commercial by-catch. The effect of this doesn't just waste steelhead, but it significantly reduces the vitality of a world-renowned steelhead sport fishery and the economy that surrounds it.

“Under the authority of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, a significant percentage of this year's Skeena steelhead run was killed in order for commercial fisheries to occur with the most impact coming from non-selective gillnets,” said North Coast Steelhead Alliance Chair, Keith Douglas. “We find this completely unacceptable fisheries management. Not only is DFO unnecessarily impacting a unique fish stock, but they are also harming the upriver sport-fishing tourism economy by allowing this by-catch. Moreover, DFO and industry are blatantly ignoring commitments they made to the Marine Stewardship Council about moving towards more sustainable selective fishing,” continued Douglas.

Dean River steelhead are another issue. “In the most sensitive part of Dean Channel, an unusually late season opening likely resulted in more gillnet days and steelhead by-catch than has been seen in twenty years,” stated Rob Stewart, central coast B.C. Federation of Fly Fishers representative. “Significantly, no steelhead conservation measures were in place, as there have been no gillnet openings in the last two decades contemplated that late in the season in that area due to quality and conservation concerns for the target chum stocks.”

Similarly on the Fraser River there are problems with steelhead by catch in non-selective commercial fisheries. “Canada has made a commitment to sustainable fisheries in the *Wild Salmon Policy* (2005). Further, the commercial fishing industry and DFO have recently made commitments to the Marine Stewardship Council to implement selective harvesting for both sockeye and pink salmon fisheries,” said Brian Braidwood, Steelhead Society of B.C. President. “With an estimated 17 million pink salmon destined for the Fraser River system this fall, and the potential for commercial chum fisheries, it is imperative that DFO and industry immediately seek ways to harvest those salmon without impacting co-migrating Interior Fraser steelhead stocks which have over-lapping run timing.”

“Last year, despite the closure of the Thompson River to sport fishing, the B.C. Fish and Wildlife Branch estimated that 500 steelhead survived to spawn, the lowest escapement in 28 years of monitoring,” said

Braidwood. “Clearly, there appears little time left for Interior Fraser steelhead. Rebranding gillnets as ‘selective’ through the use of modifications like ‘weedlines’ and other techniques is not an option.”

“The Steelhead Society has long advocated for truly selective commercial salmon fisheries,” maintains Braidwood. “DFO and industry resistance to change has been one of the major reasons Interior Fraser steelhead populations have come to the brink of extirpation and there needs to be immediate change in salmon harvest methodology.”

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-Backgrounder-

Canada’s *Wild Salmon Policy*, enacted June 2005, places conservation of salmon and their habitats as the first priority for resource management and its primary goal *“is to restore and maintain healthy and diverse salmon populations and their habitats for the benefit and enjoyment of the people of Canada in perpetuity. This policy goal will be advanced by safeguarding the genetic diversity of wild salmon populations, maintaining habitat and ecosystem integrity, and managing fisheries for sustainable benefits.”* It should be noted that steelhead are considered to be “salmon”.

In July 2010, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) conditionally certified B.C.’s sockeye fisheries as “sustainable.” Of particular note to Skeena sockeye fisheries and steelhead the MSC states:

“Condition 35c – Certification is conditional until the management agencies and the terminal gillnet fisheries demonstrate their commitment to implement selective fishing and handling techniques that have been shown to increase the post-release survival of non-target species, within one year (Skeena Condition #3.1c).

“Condition 36b – Certification will be conditional until there is a clear commitment from the management agency and fishers to identify and implement selective fishing techniques that are consistent with the goal of reducing the catch of non-target species, especially steelhead. These tasks should be completed within two years (Skeena Condition #3.2b).”

Further, the MSC certification team found that *“while some [Skeena] harvesters have complied with requests for data on catch and discards of non-target species, it is clear that the number of complying fishers is not sufficient to provide reliable estimates of total catches and discards for steelhead.”*

In referring to Skeena sockeye fisheries, the report of Independent Science Review Panel, 2005, found that, *“The whole notion that traditional gillnet fisheries can be made selective, and more broadly that captured fish can be released with high survival rates from any commercial fishing operation (seine, gillnet, or even large beach seines), must be viewed with great suspicion.”*

In May 2011, B.C.'s Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (MFLNRO), which maintains provincial jurisdiction over steelhead, requested change in both the Skeena and Fraser rivers, and commercial fisheries in their approach areas, in order to facilitate "*getting as many wild steelhead in the rivers as possible*". MFLNRO is concerned about steelhead by-catch in non-selective commercial fisheries and they have urged the implementation of selective fisheries on the Fraser and Skeena in accordance with MSC principals and conditions.

For the past three of four years the Interior Fraser steelhead sport fishery (Thompson and Chilco/Chicotin rivers) has remained closed to sport fishing denying angling and economic opportunities. Last year, steelhead escapement to the Thompson River was an estimated 500 steelhead and the Chilcotin River, 374, two indicator streams that the province monitors. Despite these closures, the exploitation rate for Interior steelhead, estimated at approximately 10 percent, remains unchanged. Given poor industry compliance with catch reporting requirements coast wide, exploitation rate estimates must be viewed with a high degree of suspicion.

DFO and the B.C. west coast commercial fishing industry are failing the test of Canada's *Wild Salmon Policy* and the Marine Stewardship Council's principles and conditions. If DFO and industry indifference to steelhead on the north and central coasts follows to the Fraser and Johnstone Strait commercial fisheries, Interior Fraser steelhead will likely continue on the path towards extirpation.