Pacific Coast Steelhead Management Meeting

*British Columbia Steelhead Status Review*

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Mark Beere

Senior Fisheries Biologist

Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, Smithers, BC

More than 430 steelhead stocks are present in streams along British Columbia’s 27 000 kilometre (17 000 mile) coastline. These stocks can be characterized as one of three ecotypes, determined by adult freshwater entry date and migratory distance: coastal winter run, coastal summer run and interior summer run.

Current hatchery releases of 36 K fry and 280 K smolts are much diminished from mid-1980’s releases of 1.5 M fry and 1 M smolts - now eleven streams are stocked compared to nearly eighty at that time.

Conservation status tends to improve to the north of the province, a pattern that has been reported previously and hypothesized to be in part reflective of marine survival rates. There have been recent declines in abundance for some interior and south coast stocks. At present, steelhead abundance in all six indicator streams in the Skeena Region is estimated to be within BC’s *Routine Management Zone* (RMZ), defined as abundance greater than 0.30 of the maximum adult recruitment relative to a habitat-based maximum smolt production estimate (the *Conservation Concern Threshold* (CCT)). Steelhead abundance in one of two Central Coast index streams (the Dean River) places that population within the RMZ while the other is not only below the CCT, but also the *Limit Reference Point* (LRP), defined as < 0.15 of the maximum adult recruitment, placing it within the ECCZ or BC’s *Extreme Conservation Concern Zone*. The abundance of one of two Interior Fraser indicator stocks is also within the ECCZ while the other (the Thompson River) is on the *Conservation Concern Zone* (CCZ)-ECCZ threshold. The abundance of all three monitored stocks in the Lower Mainland is within the CCZ. On Vancouver Island, three indicator stocks are within the CCZ, while two (including the Keogh River) are below the LRP, within the ECCZ.

Recreational fishing effort for steelhead, as assessed by license sales and the Steelhead Harvest Analysis angler questionnaire, continues to increase in all management regions while CPUE has increased in all regions but the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island. Almost half of BC’s 150 K days of steelhead angler effort is reported in the Lower Mainland followed by a third for the Skeena Region. More than half of the steelhead catch occurs within Skeena Region streams while Lower Mainland fisheries contribute a quarter of the 100 K steelhead provincial catch.

Efforts to bound non-resident angler opportunities have led to further compression of angler effort and lotteries have been proposed by some stakeholders. BC’s approach to steelhead management, as prescribed by the recently approved *Provincial Framework for Steelhead Management in BC* and the *Steelhead Stream Classification Policy* (2005) documents, continues to be very precautionary, characterized by wild steelhead release and conservative terminal tackle requirements. Recently passed legislation, the Water Sustainability Act, advocates for more consideration of water in land use decisions and during periods of drought. Commercial interceptions of steelhead in tidal salmon fisheries continues to challenge BC steelhead managers and recent indications from federal fishery managers signal a return to more aggressive fisheries with associated high by-catch mortality. Recent project proposals for major industrial developments have the potential to significantly alter both steelhead habitat and angler experience, while recent precedent-setting legal declarations pertaining to aboriginal rights and title will have significant bearing on future natural resource management decisions.