

B.C. FEDERATION OF DRIFT FISHERS

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V3A 9K6

Jan 5, 2022

Ministry of Agriculture Food & Fisheries

Hon: Lana Popham Minister

Re: Skeena and provincial steelhead issues

Sent via e mail

Dear Minister:

We are writing expressing our grave concerns that 1923 steelhead were reported being retained in fisheries by First Nations on the Skeena River in 2021. This number represents a minimum 36% of the total projected return of 5300 wild Skeena steelhead. Obviously this estimated return to the watershed could end up being significantly lower on the spawning beds with subsequent predation and poaching. Allowing a retention fishery on a stock of acute concern by any sector in natal watersheds is very concerning and severely threatens future returns of this stock. It should be noted that in the past several years alarms have been raised that Skeena steelhead were not meeting conservation threshold requirements. We must question why your Ministry responsible for steelhead management would allow any retention under these circumstances?

The Public fishery has supported closures as required to save these B.C. icons. With current imposed closures we find it totally unacceptable that other sectors be allowed retention fisheries! The release of wild steelhead province wide has been accepted by the Public fishery and considering the functional extinction of many provincial stocks how can your Ministry allow retention as demonstrated on the Skeena system? Our on-going collaborative meetings with First Nations, particularly on the Fraser indicate concerns for steelhead survival and willingness to discuss options toward ensuring their survival.

We are confident that you agree that we don't want Skeena steelhead to suffer the same slide to extinction as Interior Fraser steelhead. Very significant discussion has occurred recently toward the requirement of respectful collaboration between your Ministry, DFO, First Nations

and the other sectors to prevent extinction of steelhead province wide. Unfortunately some stocks on the Gold River, once a premier wild steelhead river on Vancouver Island, and elsewhere are now basically extinct, which further emphasizes the urgency of required collaborative measures.

No species has been studied more than B.C. steelhead. The prime causes of potential extinction and required recovery options have been identified in many past studies. Unfortunately these studies have seen little follow up despite the recognized slide to extirpation. We are hopeful that the recent statements at the PAAT and SFAB venues would indicate that your Ministry will actively pursue meaningful collaboration with DFO and other interests seeking immediate actions required to save the remnants of many stocks.

We stress that further studies are not required! Tough decisions regarding immediate actions are required! The priority immediate action is ensuring that any fisheries on the Skeena and elsewhere are truly selective and minimize impact on stocks of concern such as steelhead. Another required immediate option is selective removal of pinnipeds, particularly in the estuaries as science has proven that they intercept 60% of outgoing steelhead smolts as well as having a significant impact on adults. These same studies also indicate a 40% impact on Chinook smolts. We appreciate these priorities require tough decisions but are mandatory to save steelhead and chinook stocks.

The Recreational fishery through the PAAT and SFAB processes and within member organizations continues to place conservation first while offering support to save and rebuild salmon and steelhead stocks for our future generations. We respect First Nations constitutional rights and Reconciliation while ensuring the rights of all Canadians are respected. We have been instrumental in creating Collaborative Tables with First Nations including the current Lower Fraser Collaborative Table which includes commercial fishers and 23 First Nation bands, where steelhead issues have been flagged as a priority.

We are requesting information on how your Ministry will ensure that FSC and commercial net fisheries for anticipated increases in sockeye runs for 2022 will provide required protection for both the Skeena and Fraser systems.

We are requesting your support in providing leadership toward the urgently required joint government/First Nations/Stakeholder actions to ensure these priceless B.C. steelhead, province wide are preserved for all future generations of Canadians.

Your comments in response greatly appreciated.

Rod Clapton, President

