

EARLY TIMED FRASER CHINOOK

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Each and every year since 2001, the Fraser River First Nations technical process has recommended that harvest rates on early timed Fraser chinook not be increased. In fact, most biologists familiar with these stocks are very concerned. Escapements are declining, and despite consistent technical advice, it appears that harvest rates are increasing, and not either staying the same or decreasing. It also appears that most of the harvest is taking place inside the river during FSC fisheries by Fraser First Nations.

This issue was raised as a harvest planning issue for 2006 at the Integrated salmon Harvest Planning Committee (IHPC). I sit on this committee as a representative of the Marine Conservation Caucus, (not as a representative of Fraser First Nations). The IHPC does not deal with Food, Social and Ceremonial fisheries. The IHPC only deals with commercial, sales and sport fisheries. The catches of Fraser chinook that take place within the Fraser were provided to the IHPC, but no information was presented to show who else was catching these fish and how many they were catching. Sports and commercial fisheries all the way to Central Alaska have opportunities to harvest these fish, and winter troll fisheries on the west coast of Vancouver Island could also take Fraser early chinook, along with spring sport fisheries in the San Juan Islands and the early sport fisheries in the lower Fraser that now begin in May. The Creel survey that was once in place to estimate the harvest of salmon in the ocean sport fisheries is now almost non-existent during the time when early Fraser chinook are passing through, and while we know how many chinook are harvested commercially, we really need to know how many of these fish are early chinook of Fraser origin.

The wild salmon policy is changing almost everything Fraser Salmon managers do. Until a few years ago, there were three groups of Fraser chinook, early summer, summer and late stocks (mostly Harrison/Chilliwack white chinook). Now, under the Wild Salmon Policy, there will be five or six groups or "Conservation Units" within the Fraser. There will probably be three separate groups of early timed Fraser chinook (Birkenhead, Early chinook that return to spawn at four years of age (Early 4₂ chinook) and early Fraser chinook that return to spawn as five year old chinook (early 5₂ chinook). Of these all three need to be managed carefully.

The Birkenhead is now the subject of a detailed stock assessment being undertaken jointly by Fraser First Nations technical staff, Mount Currie First Nation, and DFO, while the other two stock groups are still in limbo. As of today, I still don't know exactly which stocks are being grouped as early 4₂'s and which are grouped as early 5₂'s, and no formal assessment document is available.

So, while there is general technical agreement that these stocks are a conservation concern, what we don't know is exactly what stock groups we are talking about, and what the assessment process for these stocks will be. While it is true that in-river FSC fisheries appear to be the major harvesters of early timed Fraser chinook, I have no reliable data in hand to show how many early timed Fraser chinook are being harvested in commercial and sport fisheries. That said, early timed Fraser chinook appear to be in real trouble, and it is time to consider ways to reduce the impact of FSC fisheries on these stocks.

This winter offers the chance to review the data and management process of Fraser chinook, to identify and fill in information gaps, and move forward with Wild Salmon Policy implementation. Neither DFO nor First Nations can do this in isolation, and a Fraser Watershed Joint Technical Committee should be tasked to work on this issue in order to provide better information to the First Nations and DFO decision-makers.

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