

QUESNEL RIVER WATERSHED COHO

By Pete Nicklin, Assistant Stock Management
Coordinator

Usually at this time of year, the Horsefly River is a smelly place to be, and pretty quiet compared to the weeks before. The sockeye have completed their spawning, and only the last few are guarding their redds prior to completing their life cycle. By mid-October, the adult sockeye in the Horsefly are carcasses in the water and on the banks of the river. The few of us in the field get used to the fishy smell and prepare for the arrival of the coho over the next 6 or so weeks.

However, 2005 is a not a usual year in the Quesnel watershed. The sockeye stock assessment crews are still working, and we are watching sockeye continue to migrate through the McKinley Creek coho enumeration fence to spawn in that sub-basin. This was truly a late year for the sockeye, and although the number of sockeye returning to the Quesnel drainage is not what was expected in-season, it is encouraging to see them come back!

As part of my work with the Upper Fraser Fisheries Conservation Alliance, I am providing technical assistance to DFO and the Cariboo Tribal Council (CTC) to research and assess coho populations in the Quesnel River watershed. Since I wanted something a little different to write about for this edition of Watershed Talk, I checked with Gord Sterritt (Fisheries Resource Manager of Cariboo Tribal Council) to see if it was OK to tell readers about the coho work being done by the CTC this fall, and he said "No problem!"

Although the coho are not nearly as numerous as the sockeye in the Quesnel watershed, the assessment and research being undertaken by CTC is very important. This coho population is a sub-unit of the Interior Fraser Coho designated unit, currently under review for possible listing under the Species at Risk Act (SARA), and is classified as an endangered species under the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) guidelines.

The Cariboo Tribal Council Fisheries Program has been involved in assessing the Quesnel River watershed coho population with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) since the fall of 2001. CTC started off by doing aerial over-flights and a few stream walks to get a handle on adult coho distribution in the Horsefly system. Then in 2002, CTC was awarded the contract to run the

coho enumeration fence in McKinley Creek, a major tributary to the Horsefly River. CTC has had the enumeration fence contract ever since, and worked hard with DFO to expand the coho program every year.

Interior Fraser coho adults, particularly in the Upper Fraser, are notoriously hard to assess due to their fall migration timing, timid nature, and affinity for occupying remote habitat areas. Therefore, although very little is known about the distribution and overall population numbers of Upper Fraser coho salmon, the McKinley Creek coho enumeration and integrated assessment projects in the Quesnel River watershed provide important data to the Interior Fraser population database.

Quesnel River watershed adult coho populations are assessed with the following methods:

- Helicopter aerial counts
- Horsefly River float counts
- Stream walk assessments
- McKinley Creek Coho Enumeration Fence: CTC Fisheries operates the enumeration fence, and has done so since the fall of 2002. The enumeration fence is the primary stock assessment tool in this program. The main purpose of the enumeration fence is to provide a complete and total count of the spawning coho population migrating into McKinley Creek, the largest sub-population of coho in the Quesnel River watershed.

Even with an expanding coho program in the watershed, it is obvious to the CTC, UFFCA and DFO that there is still so much to be learned. Therefore, those three parties have been working hard for several months to bring in the Interior Fraser Coho Recovery Team, UNBC and other interested parties to pursue research opportunities in this watershed, with a focus on McKinley Creek.

There are some really positive and pro-active steps being taken with the coho in Quesnel River, and I'm optimistic that this work will continue to grow, and contribute to the knowledge base for Interior Fraser Coho in a major way.

For more information contact Pete Nicklin at (250) 392-5888 or by email at indiseant@shaw.ca.