



BC STEELHEAD STOCKS IN CRISIS

Angling groups demand action to defend iconic ocean-going trout runs from extinction

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Four groups representing many thousands of recreational anglers in B.C. are sounding the alarm about the decline of steelhead numbers returning to B.C. rivers.

The Thompson River, a major tributary of the Fraser, once supported a thriving recreational steelhead fishery, but returns in recent years have fallen from an estimated abundance of 4000 spawners in 1985 to less than 200 spawners projected for 2018. This is a 95 per cent reduction in the return to the spawning grounds. Government officials now classify interior Fraser steelhead populations as being of “extreme conservation concern” with this year’s return shaping up to be the worst on record.

The BC Federation of Fly Fishers, BC Federation of Drift Fishers, Steelhead Society of BC, and the BC Wildlife Federation are calling on Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the B.C. government to immediately work together to recognize the steelhead crisis and to implement an action plan to prevent the loss of Thompson and other iconic wild B.C. steelhead stocks.

“Thompson River steelhead used to provide one of the most famous sport fisheries on the planet,” said Brian Braidwood, president of the Steelhead Society of BC. “If we don’t take strong action over the next couple of years, we will lose it forever.”

The main causes of the decline in steelhead numbers are inhospitable ocean conditions related to climate change, habitat degradation, and fishing mortality. Interior Fraser steelhead are caught as “incidental bycatch” in commercial and aboriginal gill net fisheries targeting more abundant runs of chum salmon, which migrate alongside the steelhead in the fall.

“Fishing is the one factor the governments have immediate control over,” said Rod Clapton, president of the BC Federation of Drift Fishers. “If you want to save a fish population that is at the brink of extinction, you shut down the fisheries that are harming them. It’s basic common sense.”

Steelhead are ocean-going rainbow trout that can reach up to 40 pounds and are highly prized by recreational anglers for their size and strength. Unlike Pacific salmon, which die after spawning once, steelhead can spawn multiple times during their lives, each time returning to sea and then back to their home rivers. While Pacific salmon are managed by Fisheries and Oceans Canada, steelhead are managed by the Provincial



government, and neither level of government has taken meaningful action to address the crisis.

“Minister Dominic LeBlanc in Ottawa and Minister Doug Donaldson in Victoria need to hear us loud and clear: the time for discussions and studies is over, the time for action is now, and you need to step up and do your jobs in protecting this national treasure,” said Bob Hooton, a representative of the BC Federation of Fly Fishers and a retired Senior Fisheries Biologist with the Provincial Fish & Wildlife Branch, who spent 37 years there with the majority of that time as a steelhead specialist.

"Our organizations recommend that the provincial government provide \$7.5 million in funding for an interior Fraser steelhead four year action plan that addresses stock recovery collaboratively with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, First Nations, and stakeholders," stated BCWF President Harvey Andrusak.

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