



Addressing Extreme Conservation Concern on Steelhead Stocks

For immediate release November 24, 2017

The B.C. chum salmon fishery is certified sustainable under the [Marine Stewardship Council](#) (MSC) ecolabel program. But seine net and gillnet chum fisheries, which take three quarters of the chum commercial catch, are threatening endangered Thompson and Chilcotin river steelhead.

Catches to date of steelhead in test fisheries continue to suggest that Fraser River late-run summer steelhead stocks are at extremely low levels of abundance and in a state of *Extreme Conservation Concern*. The current spawning population forecast for the Thompson watershed is 145 and the current spawning population for the Chilcotin is 45. These forecasts represent record low spawning abundances. An equal number of these fish is estimated to be removed as by-catch in the chum fisheries.

The chum fishery is the only controllable source of mortality of interior Fraser steelhead. According to the MSC certification, a fishery is deemed sustainable if it is managed so that other species and habitats within the ecosystem remain healthy. The MSC website proudly states “When you see seafood with the blue MSC label, you can be sure it comes from a sustainable fishery”. This fishery may be sustainable for chum salmon, but it is clearly not sustainable for interior Fraser River steelhead populations.

The BC Wildlife Federation (BCWF), along with other groups representing recreational fishing, have written to the ministers of Environment, Agriculture and Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (FLNRO) to inform them it is unacceptable that the B.C. chum salmon fishery continues to receive the MSC certification given it has such a large impact on the endangered Thompson and Chilcotin steelhead populations.

The BCWF, BC Federation of Fly Fishers (BCFFF), BC Federation of Drift Fishers (BCDFD), Steelhead Society of BC (SSBC) also wrote to Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) Minister LeBlanc on November 16, 2017 to request a review for an Emergency Listing Order under the *Species At Risk Act* for Thompson and Chilcotin Steelhead. There are a number of factors that have led to the decline of steelhead that need to be addressed. However, given the current status of the populations and non-selective fishing impacts of the chum fishery on escapement, the steelhead population crisis demands our immediate attention and action.



BCWF President Harvey Andrusak said, “The genetic diversity and habitat of the Thompson Chilcotin steelhead should be the highest priority in resource management decision making. This is not happening, and we risk losing this species completely if we continue to allow the chum fishery to unintentionally impact this vulnerable population.”

Recreational fishing groups in BC are unanimous in their call to remove the MSC sustainable certification for chum salmon and to have the Thompson Chilcotin steelhead listed under the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada ([COSEWIC](#)). The interior Fraser steelhead, or *oncorhynchus mykiss*, has received a new COSEWIC listing and a call has gone out from the organization seeking experts from both the public and private sectors to produce a status report or a designatable unit report for the species.

In the meantime, the BCWF and fishing groups want any resource management decisions around chum fishing to be made in an open, transparent and inclusive manner. Since the chum fishery impacts the steelhead, it is not appropriate that this fishery should receive the MSC sustainable fishery certification. The groups also question why DFO has not even considered closing the Fraser chum fishery to protect steelhead. The Thompson Chilcotin steelhead is a priceless biological legacy for British Columbians that is too important to continue to ignore to extinction.

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