



PACIFIC SALMON COMMISSION

ESTABLISHED BY TREATY BETWEEN CANADA
AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
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NEWS RELEASE

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The Fraser River Panel met today to receive assessments from the Pacific Salmon Commission staff on the status of the Fraser River sockeye and pink salmon runs. Test fishing catches of Fraser sockeye have remained far below expectations over the past several days. The extremely low abundance of four year-old Early Summer-run and Summer-run Fraser sockeye to-date has prevented the commencement of commercial fisheries that were scheduled during pre-season planning. The diversion rate of Fraser River sockeye through Johnstone Strait is currently estimated to be 50%. There has been steady escapement of Fraser River sockeye past Mission and Hells Gate over the past week although it has still been well below expectations.

At the Panel meeting on August 11, the run size estimate for Early Summer-run sockeye of 150,000 fish was increased to 175,000 fish, with 50% migration timing through Area 20 of July 30, which is four days later than expected. At the meeting today this run size estimate was unchanged. The estimated escapement of Early Summer-run sockeye past Mission through August 13 is approximately 127,000 fish.

At the meeting on August 11, the Panel adopted a run size estimate of 600,000 Summer-run sockeye; with 50% migration timing through Area 20 of August 4, which is one day earlier than expected. At the meeting today this run size estimate was unchanged. The estimated escapement of Summer-run sockeye past Mission through August 13 is approximately 344,000 fish.

The reason(s) for the very low returns of most Fraser sockeye stocks to-date this season are presently unknown. However, some potential factors can be rejected. First, the spawning escapement in the parent year (2005) of four year old Fraser sockeye was 3,300,000 fish; more than 1,000,000 fish greater than the average escapement on this cycle. There has been no commercial harvest of Fraser River sockeye this year and the total catch (from First Nations food, social and ceremonial fisheries and test fisheries used to assess the return) to-date is only 47,000 fish. Thus, overfishing and insufficient escapement can be ruled out as large numbers of sockeye reached their spawning areas in 2005 and only a small fraction of the total Fraser sockeye run has been harvested in 2009. Second, freshwater survival (egg-to-fry or smolt stage) was not a contributing factor in either the Chilko or Quesnel sockeye stocks which were forecast to produce 7,750,000 fish (approximately 75%) of the 10,488,000 total adult Fraser River sockeye forecast in 2009. Fry abundances measured through acoustic surveys in Quesnel Lake (52,000,000 fry) were only slightly below average for the cycle (58,000,000 fry) and the smolt outmigration estimated through an enumeration fence at the outlet of Chilko Lake (77,000,000 smolts) was nearly double the previous highest outmigration (40,000,000 smolts) in the 50 year time series. Third, the warmer than average Fraser River water temperatures in 2009 are also not a factor in the low return of adults in 2009 because the in-season estimates of Fraser sockeye abundance are generated from a combination of marine-area test fisheries and lower Fraser River hydro-acoustic surveys and both of these assessment tools have provided consistent data indicating very low Fraser sockeye abundances.

The above factors, coupled with the poor returns across most of the Fraser River sockeye stocks suggests that some factors in marine areas sometime between the time of ocean entry of the smolts in late spring and summer of 2007 and the adult return in 2009 as potential causal factors. Although there have been some preliminary discussions with experts that conduct research on juvenile sockeye in the ocean,

the current fisheries management focus remains on in-season assessments of the remaining migration of Fraser sockeye salmon (primarily Late-run stocks) and pink salmon which are expected to peak over the next few weeks. These assessments along with assessments of other salmon returns along the Pacific coast are needed to help focus future investigations into potential causal factors for the very low Fraser sockeye returns being observed.

Recent DNA analyses indicate that the proportion of Late-run sockeye in the marine approach areas is increasing. A run size estimate of 125,000 Harrison Late-run sockeye (nearly double their 50% probability level forecast of 69,000 fish) was approved at the Panel meeting on August 11, with peak Area 20 marine timing of August 4, which is one day later than expected. At the meeting today, the run size estimate of Harrison sockeye was increased to 150,000 fish, which is close to their 25% probability level forecast of 160,000 fish. The estimated peak marine timing of Harrison sockeye through Area 20 is August 4, which is one day later than expected. Thus far this season, Harrison sockeye are unique in that they are the only Fraser sockeye stock that appears to be returning in higher than their forecast level of abundance, which may be associated with their different life history and marine migratory behavior relative to other Fraser sockeye stocks. It is too early to provide an assessment on the run size of Birkenhead and non-Harrison Late-run sockeye, however, if they are near their forecast level of abundance, their 50% marine timing through Area 20 would have to be several days later than expected. Recent DNA analyses indicate that True Late-run sockeye are exhibiting little marine-area delay prior to entering the Fraser River. The estimated escapement of True Late-run sockeye past Mission through August 13 is approximately 118,000 fish.

Test fishing catches of pink salmon by purse seines in Johnstone Strait have been at moderate levels over the past week. In Juan de Fuca Strait, test fishing catches of pinks have been generally low, although they increased on August 13. Recent DNA analyses of pink salmon sampled from marine approach areas indicate that Fraser pinks currently comprise approximately 30% of the fishery mixtures. Assessments of the abundance of Fraser River pink salmon will be made near their expected peak migration through the marine approach areas, which usually occurs in late August.

Migration conditions for sockeye entering the Fraser River have improved considerably over the past week. On August 13 the Fraser River discharge at Hope was approximately 2,900 cms, which is about 20% lower than normal, while the water temperature at Qualark Creek was 18.7 °C, which is 1 °C higher than average for this date. Water temperatures in this range may cause some stress to migrating sockeye and slow their upstream migration. Water temperatures are forecast to decrease below 18 °C by August 16 and then increase to 19 °C by August 22. At the meeting on August 11, after reviewing environmental and stock assessment information, the Panel approved an increase in the management adjustment factor for Early Summer-run sockeye from 0.51 to 0.60 and for Summer-run sockeye, an increase in the management adjustment factor from 0 to 0.32. At the meeting today, these management adjustments were unchanged. Management adjustments are employed to help achieve spawning escapement targets for Fraser River sockeye.

The DFO spawning escapement update for Fraser sockeye on August 10 indicated that through August 9, the enumeration fences on Forfar and Gluske Creeks had 3,053 and 1,393 sockeye counted through them, respectively. The Dust Creek fence has passed 1,998 sockeye through August 8. The sockeye appeared to be in good condition. Chilko sockeye have not yet been observed at Henry's Bridge and no Cultus sockeye have passed through the Sweltzer Creek fence thus far. The enumeration fence for Scotch Creek sockeye is presently being installed.

The Pacific Salmon Commission reports daily test fishing catches of sockeye salmon on its recorded message at (604) 666-8200 and on the internet at: http://www.psc.org/info_testfishing_collections_2009.htm In addition, Fraser River Panel news releases, fishery regulations, sockeye and pink salmon escapement data, and sockeye and pink salmon stock status reports will be available on this website.

United States fishing schedules during the season will be available for Treaty Indian fisheries through the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission at 1-800-562-6142. Non-Indian fishing schedules will be available through the National Marine Fisheries Service's Hotline in Seattle at 1-800-662-9825. Canadian commercial fishing regulations will be announced on the Fisheries and Oceans Canada recorded message at 604-666-2828 (from the lower B.C. mainland), and toll free from outside the lower B.C. mainland at 1-866-431-3474, and via fishery notices. Consult the appropriate regulatory agency regarding fisheries regulations pertaining to species other than sockeye and pink salmon in the Fraser River Panel Management Area.

All commercial fisheries in Panel Area waters remain closed to fishing.

The next in-season meeting of the Panel is scheduled to occur on August 18. News releases in this series will be provided by the Panel through the Commission to inform those interested in the progress of the Fraser River sockeye and pink salmon runs.