

Why turn off the tap on B.C. salmon hatchery success?

Globe & Mail

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VANCOUVER— From Monday's Globe and Mail

Monday, Apr. 04, 2011

The fight over water on Nile Creek goes back a long way, but what the authorities who would turn off the tap seem to forget is that the fish have a prior claim.

If officials go ahead with a threat to cut off the water to a community-built hatchery, a facility that each spring hatches 1½ million salmon eggs will cease to operate. But instead of focusing on that exigency, officials are fixated on regulations.

Nile Creek is a small salmon stream that runs out of the rugged Beaufort Range on Vancouver Island, west of the small towns of Qualicum Beach and Bowser.

Only about 10 kilometres long, and small enough to jump across, the stream used to be known as Pink River, because of the schools of salmon that filled it in the fall. But by 1994, due to the impact of logging and other abuses, Nile Creek was down to a handful of fish. That's when a group of mostly retired people formed the Nile Creek Enhancement Society, and with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans as a partner, began to rehabilitate the watershed.

They built a small hatchery, tapped into a long unused, nearby pipe that belonged to the Qualicum Bay-Horne Lake Waterworks District, and started to incubate pink salmon eggs.

Along the way, NCES members will readily admit, they cut a few corners. Driven by a desire to restore a dying river, they tended to act first, then get the permits later. One thing they neglected to get was a water licence.

The restoration effort has been a stunning success. In 2009, a record 120,000 pink salmon returned to the creek. Last year, in what was supposed to be a low cycle for the pinks, there were 65,000 fish. In short, the little group of retirees has put together what may be the best, small-scale fisheries rehabilitation project in the whole country.

Imagine Ken Kirkby's dismay then, as he talks about a threat by the Waterworks District to turn off the tap that provides water to the hatchery.

"If they shut it off today, 1.5 million pink fry eggs would die," says the immediate past president of NCES. "Even if they wait until the eggs hatch and the fish are released, without water we will be out of business in the future. It's unbelievable this is happening, just as we seem to have reached our goal of fully restoring the river to its natural abundance."

The problem, explains Gordon Lundine, chair of the Qualicum Bay-Horne Lake Waterworks District, is that the NCES failed to get a water licence more than a decade ago, when they tapped into the pipeline that runs under a road near the creek.

It's a fine point, however, because minutes for the board show that on July 24, 1995, with Mr. Lundine in the chair, a motion was carried "to allow the Department of Fisheries & Oceans to build an [egg] incubator and tie into the waterline at the Nile Creek in-take site."

Mr. Lundine now says that the board passing a motion and NCES getting a water licence aren't the same thing.

The pipeline isn't used anymore to supply drinking water, which now comes from wells, but Mr. Lundine says it is important that the district retain its rights, in case there is an emergency, and needs to fall back on Nile Creek. And, he adds, the hatchery is outside the boundaries of the district [by a few feet] so it cannot legally be supplied with water from the pipe.

Mr. Lundine says the Waterworks District is just trying to keep things legal, and after years of demanding that the NCES get a water licence, he is tired of waiting.

So NCES has been told the tap will be turned off if the proper paperwork isn't done.

John Baldwin, the provincial government's assistant regional water manager, in Nanaimo, says he's been watching the dispute burble along for years. His office can't issue a water licence to NCES, because volunteer groups – which tend to fold up without notice – aren't allowed to hold such licences.

DFO could get one. But DFO officials have been told the government, starting this year, doesn't want to get involved in water licences anymore because of liability costs – if they get a licence they will have to maintain the pipe.

Long before the waterworks regulations came along, Nile Creek salmon depended on the water. That they need to get it now out of a pipe, which feeds a hatchery, is due to human mismanagement. The least officials can do now, is to make sure the water keeps flowing.