

B.C. to continue gravel removal, despite salmon deaths

BY LARRY PYNN , VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 12, 2009

The British Columbia government plans to remove gravel from the Fraser River this winter despite a federal auditor general report that found the extraction has killed up to 2.25 million young pink salmon.

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun

VANCOUVER — The British Columbia government plans to remove gravel from the Fraser River this winter despite a federal auditor general report that found the extraction has killed up to 2.25 million young pink salmon.

Dwayne Meredith, manager of strategic mitigation programs with Emergency Management B.C., said he expects gravel to be extracted from January to March due to flooding concerns while B.C. and Ottawa negotiate a new long-term agreement.

"We have every anticipation of removing gravel," he said in an interview from Victoria.

Rebecca Reid, regional director of habitat and enhancement for the federal Fisheries Department, said the new agreement will address issues such as monitoring gravel removal, consulting with First Nations and communications between the two governments.

The Fraser River Gravel Removal Stewardship Committee urged Ottawa on Thursday not to enter into any long-term agreements with B.C., pending the results of a commission of inquiry, announced by the federal Conservatives last week, into the collapse of Fraser River sockeye runs.

Committee spokesman Otto Langer, a former Fisheries Department biologist, said that Ottawa once prosecuted people for gravel removal but now promotes the activity.

But Meredith insisted gravel is being removed to reduce flood risk and not to access aggregate to be used in construction.

"This is all about public safety," he said. "All the gravel removal . . . is under the flood mandate. I definitely see and understand the benefits."

The report last spring by the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development on behalf of the auditor general found that in 2006, improper construction of a causeway for accessing gravel resulted in a side channel drying up, exposing salmon nests and resulting in the loss of up to 2.25 million young pink salmon.

It also found evidence of excessive removal of gravel, destruction of habitat and mining outside the approved area — events that Ottawa failed to prosecute.

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