

Express **COMMUNITY****Nechako sturgeon looking better**

By Hannah Wright

Omineca Express

Significant headway has been made in the plight to save the Nechako White Sturgeon after 33 juvenile sturgeon were captured, measured and released back into the Nechako River last week during the Fall Juvenile Index Project.

More sturgeon were captured and released this year than ever before in the five year project, and nine of the 33 fish were part of the pilot conservation facility program which began in 2006.

"The recapture of these juvenile sturgeon is an important milestone that indicates that some of the pilot hatchery sturgeon are surviving in the Nechako" said Christina Ciesielski of the NWSRI Technical Working Group in a press release.

"For the first three years we had zero numbers, and then last year we found one or two. Then this year, 33 - that's a significant milestone - that also adds lots of questions, why all of a sudden did we catch juveniles?" said Brian Frenkel, Chairperson for the Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative's Community Working Group.

The nine sturgeon were recognized as being part of the pilot program as they had been marked with pit tags with individual numbers during three Save Our Sturgeon release events in 2006, 2007 and 2008. The NWSRI group is currently working to identify who may have released the fish via the identification number.

When released the sturgeon averaged 15cm long and 20grams in size. Last week they had grown to 60cm in length and 1.3kg in size.

"The members of the NWSRI are cautiously optimistic yet extremely enthusiastic about the news" said Frenkel, in a press release.

"While the initial numbers captured are low compared to the pilot hatchery fish released the fact that pilot hatchery sturgeon have survived to become juveniles is fantastic and lends support to the success of the hatchery program".

The Carrier Sekani Tribal Council Fisheries Department (CSTC) carried out the sampling this month under direction of the Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative (NWSRI).

They will carry out further sampling at the

end of September and it is expected that more hatchery sturgeon will be captured.

Despite this positive news for the Sturgeon, Frenkel says the survival of the species is still reliant on provincial and federal funding for the building of a permanent conservation facility in Vanderhoof which is estimated will cost approximately \$3 million to build.

"Ultimately...the federal and provincial government need to make a decision as soon as possible" said Frenkel about the need for funding. The economic downturn has meant many ministries have had their budgets cut making funding problematic.

Don Peterson, President of the Freshwater Fisheries Society of BC has confirmed that \$1.5 million in funding has been set aside for the conservation facility in Vanderhoof by the Ministry of Environment.

"These funds are being held by the Freshwater Fisheries Society of BC for the express purpose of building the new sturgeon recovery facility in Vanderhoof", said Peterson. "However... the total cost of the facility will be at least \$3 million, so we still actually have only half of our construction funding in hand."

The District of Vanderhoof and the Freshwater Fisheries Society of BC are currently applying to the federal Western Economic Diversification (WED) to request the rest of the funding.

The outcome is not yet known. The first stage of the application is going to council tonight for approval and it will then be submitted. If the first stage of the application is approved then a more detailed application will need to be submitted. Peterson anticipates it could be a few months yet before the funding is confirmed or denied.

A year ago an application was made to the WED under a different program for the funding but it didn't make the cut.

Despite the need for the \$1.5 Million for the construction of the facility, Peterson said by far the biggest challenge will be the operating costs of the facility.

"The Nechako sturgeon recovery facility faces an even greater funding challenge in the need for annual operating funds for the facility and the associated field work once the facility is completed", said Peterson.

"Unless we solve the major funding issues soon, I fear our precious Nechako sturgeon will be lost, forever."



Henry Klassen, A member of the community Working Group helps to release baby Sturgeon into the river in Vanderhoof in 2008 as part of a Sturgeon recovery program