

# New sturgeon recovery project revealed

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Omineca Express

A new project is being implemented in the Nechako River this winter to help prevent the extinction of the endangered Nechako White Sturgeon.

The Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative (NWSRI) is implementing a project that aims to restore the spawning habitat of the species.

Research by the NWSRI and the Technical Working Group

(TWG), has revealed that sediment at the bottom of the river is likely to be the cause of sturgeon recruitment problems.

"One of the concerns is that there is a heavy sediment load on the bottom of the river and the sturgeon require a good gravel base to successfully have the eggs survive," said Brian Frenkel, Chair of the NWSRI Community Working Group.

"It is believed that the sediment on the bottom may be attaching to the eggs, thus disabling their ability to survive," he said.

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### Conservation facility still crucial to sturgeon survival

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In addition, fine sediments that fill in the gaps between the gravel, prevent the sturgeon larvae from being able to hide from predators.

This latest project, which has been in planning for a year and a half, aims to place 2,100 m<sup>3</sup> of clean gravel at two sites on the Nechako River in the Vanderhoof spawning reach, thereby cleaning up the impaired habitat and increasing the chances of survival during the critical early phases of life - during egg incubation and larval hiding and/or rearing phases.

The two gravel bed trials will be located upstream from the Nechako bridge to Murray Creek and close to the south west side of Riverside Park.

Fifteen-day-old sturgeon larvae dispersing will indicate the success of the project.

If the project is successful, a long-term large-scale habitat restoration project could be planned which could lead to natural recruitment restoration.

The NWSRI has high hopes for the success in the trial project given the results of their previous work as well as the work of other sturgeon recovery teams.

The Nechako white sturgeon is federally listed as endangered under the Species at Risk Act as a result of ongoing recruitment failure since 1967. The number of mature sturgeon at breeding age is estimated to be less than 450, which in turn has led to a huge reduction in the number of juveniles.

The NWSRI has a two-pronged strategy for the recovery of the species that includes not only habitat restoration for the prevention of recruitment failure, but also the building of a conser-

vation hatchery in Vanderhoof to preserve the remaining genetic variation.

\$1.5 million in funding has been set aside by the government for the building of the hatchery, however it is estimated the construction of the facility will cost close to \$3 million so until the other half of the money is gained, funds will not be released.

"The conservation facility is crucial to the survival of this species," said Frenkel.

"As the Technical Working Group, Community Working Group and the District of Vanderhoof, we are coordinating our efforts to bring this facility to reality," he said.

The Ministry of Environment has secured funding for the gravel bed trials. The project will be completed by the end of the winter so that results can be studied during this years spawning event.