Cutbacks hamstring conservation efforts

Sturgeon hatchery dollars unavailable without matching funds

**Walter Strong**

The September 2012 Nechako Environmental Enhancement Fund (NEEF) recommended that $4 million be made available for the “operation of a Nechako White Sturgeon Conservation Hatchery as directed by the Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative (NWSRI).” This funding, although supposedly available for use is actually out of reach, according to Don Peterson, President of the Freshwater Fisheries Society of B.C. (FFSBC).

“None of the resources identified by NEEF are available to groups unless there’s a third party providing matching dollars,” explains Peterson. “We are extremely concerned. Because of the poor economic situation in the province, it is extremely unlikely that the province will be able to come forward with any funding to match the NEEF offer.”

The NEEF report describes the Nechako White Sturgeon as being on the verge of immediate extinction. The NEEF report states, “There is a very real urgency and need for immediate action if this population is to become naturally self-sustaining once again.”

Wayne Saleswski of the NWSRI community working group says that the genetically unique species is at a tipping point. With the species down to approximately 400 fish, from an estimated high of at least 6,000, recovery may quickly become impossible. “If we don’t put this one together, we’re finished here,” Saleswski says.

For Saleswski the decision to set up the NEEF as a matching dollars fund was an irresponsible decision because it clouds the issue of who is responsible for the conservation effort. “The government should really be looking after this, not leaving it up entirely to local stake holders,” says Saleswski.

Peterson describes how recovery efforts like the one described in the NEEF report have been successful in other

More on page 10...
Sturgeon recovery already in the Kootenays

Members of NWSRI introduce elementary school students to work on the Nechako River.

...From page 5

parts of the province. “We have two recovery stations, the Nechako River and one in the Columbia River. In both those cases, 100 percent of the cost are paid for by the industrial partners – BC Hydro and the Bonneville Power Administration.” The Bonneville Power Administration is a U.S. federal agency.

Unfortunately, successful conservation efforts in other parts of the province cannot help with local efforts to conserve the Nechako White Sturgeon. “There is a genetically unique population that has evolved in the Nechako River,” says Peterson. “This is a population of fish that has been around since the last ice age.”

Despite more than twenty years of effort, Peterson says, “unless we get strong signals that funding will be forthcoming in the future, we will be in the position of having to stop the work we’re doing and just accept the fact that the parties involved with getting this species back extant.”

Sawlesi shares Peterson’s frustration. “We need the BC government to step forward here and put that funding in place to finish off the hard work that’s already been done.”

In 1952 the Nechako Dam was constructed to provide power generation to Rio Tinto Alcan operations in Kitimat, B.C. The dam severely impacted the flow of the Nechako River, and according to the NWSRI, this has substantially influenced the decline of the white sturgeon. Rio Tinto was not available for comment at press time, but yearly reports published by the NWSRI indicate that Rio Tinto has been contributing to the sturgeon initiative.

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