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Urgency rises to build sturgeon hatchery

By Cameron Ginn

At their prime, the Nechako white sturgeon numbered in the thousands.

But what remains of their population today, about 350, has pushed



Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative photo

A juvenile Nechako White sturgeon is released.

Vanderhoof council to the limits of their patience.

Last Monday, following many months of lackluster progress toward building a sturgeon hatchery in Vanderhoof, council scheduled a meeting in January 2013 with a number of high-ranking government, corporate and environmental representatives to revive the project.

"We're so close," said Councillor Brian Frenkel, chair of the Nechako River Sturgeon Action Planning Group.

"The money is there and I think all we need to do is get everybody into one room and hammer out the final details."

As it stands, the Freshwater Fisheries Society of B.C. (FSSBC) has committed more than \$3 million to build the sturgeon recovery facility. The District of Vanderhoof has banked about \$300,000, in addition to donating land, servicing, site preparation and possible tax relief.

Matched with dollars from the Nechako Environmental Enhancement Fund (NEEF), there is enough money leftover to operate the facility for about seven years at a cost of \$500,000 annually, according to Cory Williamson, a fish biologist for the Ministry of Forests, Lands and

Natural Resource Operations, and chair of the Nechako and Upper Fraser White Sturgeon Recovery Team.

"I think everybody wants to see this go, and the longer we wait, the more difficult it is for the sturgeon," he said.

However, the future of the facility hinges on securing at least ten years of operating funds, as stipulated in a resolution created by the FFSBC and the district.

For the FFSBC, the resolution serves as a precautionary, fail-safe measure to protect the society, the hatchery and its would-be employees and investors.

"We don't want to build a facility and then find out next year, or three years from now, that there's no more money to operate it and we've got it boarded up," said President Don Peterson.

More than half a century has passed since the provincial government authorized the Aluminum Company of Canada (Alcan), now Rio Tinto Alcan (RTA), to build the Kenney Dam on the Nechako River, rerouting its natural flow to generate electricity for smelting operations.

Called the Kemano Project, the historical engineering feat opened northwestern B.C. to industrial and economic development, but inflicted detrimental long-term consequences downstream; starving regions of water flow, impacting fisheries, driving away the Cheslatta Carrier First Nation and forcing the Nechako white sturgeon to the brink of extinction.

Relations between Alcan and the province were dashed in 1979, when the B.C. government rejected the company's proposal to expand the generating capacity of its Kemano power plant. Alcan, in turn, launched a \$500-million lawsuit against the provincial government.

With legal proceedings absorbing huge amounts of money that could have been benefitting damaged watersheds, the province settled with Alcan in 1997 and established the NEEF management committee to review, assess and report on options for the remediation of the Nechako watershed area.

RTA committed \$50 million to the NEEF. An in-kind contribution from the B.C. government was later dropped due to the province's declining fiscal environment.

The province may "contribute on an in-kind basis as it continues its work on fisheries in particular," said Vivian Thomas, communications manager for the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, in an email on Oct. 12, 2012.

The \$3.5 million amassed by the FFSBC came from RTA, outside their obligations to the NEEF, and the province. Although enough to build the hatchery, the amount falls short of what's required under the resolution.

"We are working on behalf of funding partners and we're not going to take a risk on wasting that money," said Peterson.

"There has to be some reasonable expectation that this facility is going to be operated for a reasonable number of years."

Unfortunately, time is running out.

The Nechako White Sturgeon is listed as endangered under the Species at Risk Act, the purposes of which "are to prevent wildlife species from being extirpated or becoming extinct, to provide for the recovery of wildlife species that are extirpated, endangered or threatened as a result of human activity and to manage species of special concern to prevent them from becoming endangered or threatened," according to the Department of Justice.

Yet despite the increasing threat of extinction, Peterson says the federal government has offered "next to nothing," even after repeated requests for assistance.

"That has been a complete and utter waste of time," he said.

In all likelihood, the remainder of the operating funds will come from the B.C. government, but the timing couldn't be worse considering the province's stark financial situation in a pre-election period, explained Peterson.

"We're really caught in a bind, and when I say we, it's not us, it's the Nechako White sturgeon."

Peterson expressed frustration, too, that RTA hasn't contributed more money, apart from their \$50-million in-kind contribution to the NEEF, to save the sturgeon.

"It's inconceivable to us that a corporation the size of RTA, that has derived millions and millions and millions of dollars in revenue out of the Nechako River every year for 60 years, can sit by and watch Nechako sturgeon go extinct because of their dam," he said.

"If things aren't solved, I think everyone knows where the finger will be pointed."

In other parts of the province, industry is succeeding with efforts to restore White sturgeon populations.

On the Columbia River, B.C. Hydro pays for the entire cost of sturgeon recovery, once valued at \$900,000 per year. On the Kootenai River, the Bonneville Power Administration, an American corporation, is also paying the full costs of recovery, said Peterson.

Although some progress has been made over the past 18 months, a sense of urgency is rising in the Nechako River Sturgeon Action Planning Group.

To bring the project to fruition, the group has downsized the facility and is looking at terminating monitoring, stock assessment and other activities, a measure that would reduce operating costs by an estimated \$300,000 annually.

"The money is there to build it," said Frenkel.

"It's not 10 years of operations, but six or seven years is a long time for us to raise the other three or four years worth of funding. I'm not worried about it. We'll do that."