

■ NECHAKO STURGEON

Funding cuts could end project

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A grim future lies ahead for the local sturgeon population if current initiatives continue to be at a standstill.

The proposed \$3.2 million white sturgeon hatchery project is yet to see the light of day as federal priorities seem to be elsewhere.

"We're so close," says Brian Frenkel, Avison Management Services director and chairman of the community working group on the hatchery project.

Studies indicate that in the last 50 years the Nechako white sturgeon population has dropped from what some scientists believe was a minimum of 5,000 fish to less than 600.

The Nechako White Sturgeon Initiative (NWSI) was put in place to put together a recovery plan, which was split into two groups: technical working group and the community working group.

"The groups worked very hard to get the sturgeon on the endangered species list," said Frenkel. "We fought hard to get the species on the list. So now it is my frustration that the federal government is not helping with going forward."

Frenkel and the community of Vanderhoof wanted to "get behind" saving the species.

"The species have been listed as imperial," he said. "It has been a passion of everyone that has been involved to do the right thing."

The provincial government has donated \$1,500,000 to the project, the land for the sturgeon facilities have been donated on behalf of Vanderhoof, however, the project still requires a partner to come on board to have enough funding to go forward with the construction of the white sturgeon hatchery.

According to Frenkel research is still required to determine what needs to be done to keep

the species diverse so that researchers can keep creating and keeping the species from becoming extinct.

"The bottom line is that we have to start doing this or the species will go extinct," said Frenkel.

Sturgeon require gravel-like surfaces to spawn so that the larvae can find its way between gravel stones where they can successfully mature and stay hidden from natural predators.

"Survivability of sturgeon is unknown at this time," said Frenkel. "The facility will allow sturgeon to mature to the point that they are big enough to fend off predators, therefore will allow the survival rate to increase."

Frenkel feels that the federal government and business groups need to step in and help save the species.

"This whole area is engaged in saving this species," he said. "We have been working on this project for four years."