



Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council

Conseil pour la conservation des ressources halieutiques du pacifique

Summary

In the latter part of 2008, the Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council commissioned a report to update the information and findings first contained in a 2002 background paper by Brian Riddell on Pacific salmon stocks in the crucial areas of southern British Columbia. Its purpose is to identify any major shifts in productivity or emerging issues related to salmon conservation.

In July 2009, the Council published the background paper entitled *Status of Pacific Salmon Resources in Southern British Columbia and the Fraser River Basin*. Authored for the Council by fisheries biologist Marc Labelle, this report explains that it presents information taken from several sources, with contributions of data and findings from field surveys and analysis. It looks at each of the stock categories in the four regions of southern British Columbia: Fraser River; Okanagan; Strait of Georgia; and West Coast of Vancouver Island.

The report deals with the five salmon species, but does not review steelhead status. It provides a valuable reference for fisheries managers by assembling the information in forms not otherwise available to them.

While the report does not draw comprehensive conclusions about the status of the stocks across the entire region, it presented several useful and relevant perspectives on local and regional conditions, and it comments on trends observable for each species within those areas. It provides evidence of important changes in conditions, such the endangered status listing for Interior Fraser River coho and the slow pace of rebuilding for coho generally in the Fraser River. It suggests that it is all the more important now, in light of continued poor coho productivity, to stop and reverse the habitat degradation that appears to be a significant contributing factor in the failure of the stocks to recover.

The report explains how wild salmon management continues to be hindered by voids in data and an absence of essential information. Without reliable knowledge of factors such as historical exploitation, escapement, habitat conditions and ocean survival rates, the status of many salmon stocks in the region is largely guesswork. The declines in the extent of assessment and resulting absence of escapement data for stocks have increased the risks associated with stock management when insufficient information is available.

As a follow-up to the report seven years ago that provided an overview of conditions and trends, this background paper on southern area stocks attempts to remain consistent in format with the presentation of data and findings. However, the lack of consistency in the available information has required the use of a different approach in reporting to be adopted for some stocks.

The background paper confirms that salmon stocks were relatively stable until 1990, when environmental conditions began to disrupt the patterns of productivity. Problems related to marine survival, particularly for Fraser River sockeye, have been identified in several instances in the past decade, particularly in 2005 and 2009. The slow recovery of coho in the southern region, in spite of rigorous fishing restrictions and freshwater habitat project investment, has been a frustration for fisheries managers. The contrast of high pink returns in the Fraser River and exceptionally low escapement for pinks on the West Coast of Vancouver Island have been a matter of further concern.

The report provides a reminder that the trends that appeared to be related to the marine phase of the salmon lifecycle were the subject of the Council's letters to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada in 2002, citing the severity of the declines and urging a combined research and management program to deal with them.