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NEWS RELEASE

BC conservationists blast federal government for irresponsible salmon fisheries

Groups call on Minister to “move fisheries into the 21st century”

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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VANCOUVER – Commercial fisheries targeting pink salmon on British Columbia's north coast have discarded over 1.37 million pounds of chum salmon over the past month, enough to fill 40 transport trucks. Many of these fish are from depleted stocks and many will not survive to spawn, according to scientists with Watershed Watch Salmon Society, Raincoast Conservation Foundation, and SkeenaWild Conservation Trust.

Fishermen have been required to discard chum salmon in several fisheries this year because of concerns for low abundance in the Skeena and Nass watersheds, and rivers throughout BC's iconic Great Bear Rainforest. In one remote fishing area 150 km south of Prince Rupert, over 310 metric tons of chum salmon were discarded in order to retain 870 metric tons of pink salmon. Unlike other BC fisheries, no independent observers have been present in this fishery to help ensure compliance with fishing regulations including the safe release of chum salmon. Without this oversight, most discarded fish are not expected to survive to spawn, also depriving wildlife of an important food source.

“It's crazy to allow this kind of competitive time-limited fishery and at the same time expect fishermen to return so many salmon to the water in a careful manner when no one is watching”, said Greg Knox, executive director of SkeenaWild. “Fishery managers confirmed to us that regulations were not being followed, but the fishery was allowed to continue with no serious or immediate consequences for offenders”.

“Those discarded chum salmon could have fed bears, eagles, wolves, and dozens of other wildlife species in our coastal rivers.” explained biologist Misty MacDuffee from Raincoast. “Salmon availability influences physical condition and cub survival for coastal grizzlies, and chum salmon are a preferred food species for bears, making them an important resource.”

The UK-based Marine Stewardship Council recently certified BC's pink salmon fisheries as “sustainable”, a designation that MacDuffee says should be revoked if current fishing practices are allowed to persist.

“Not only is it wasteful and unsustainable to allow this sort of fishery in this day and age, but it is also unnecessary”, concluded Aaron Hill, ecologist with Watershed Watch. “The pink salmon these fishermen are targeting could easily be harvested using techniques that would ensure high survival of discarded fish from depleted stocks. All that's required is some leadership from Minister Ashfield in Ottawa. What's stopping him?”

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See below for contacts and backgrounder. Photos available on request.



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BACKGROUND: Chum salmon discards in the Great Bear Rainforest

North Coast BC commercial salmon fishermen have discarded over 20% (by weight) of their total catch so far this year, including 1.37 million pounds (624 metric tons) of chum salmon. Many of these fish are from stocks that federal fisheries scientists have described as being of “special conservation concern”. Most of the discarded fish are not expected to survive, losing their only chance to spawn after spending four years in the Pacific Ocean. One-half of these chum discards (310 metric tons as of August 11) came from areas in and around the Great Bear Rainforest on Canada’s west coast.

The ecological cost of chum discards

The abundance of many stocks of chum salmon on BC’s central and north coast is too low to withstand significant fishing pressure. There are also growing concerns over the impact that low salmon abundance has on coastal grizzlies, other wildlife that rely on salmon, and the healthy functioning of salmon-dependent ecosystems.

The massive amounts of nutrients and energy that salmon bring back to BC’s watersheds every year can be likened to the wildebeest migrations of the Serengeti. Similar to their African ungulate counterparts, spawning salmon provide an essential seasonal food to many species. For coastal grizzlies, the health of individuals, the number of cubs per female, and population densities are all strongly related to the consumption of salmon. Grizzlies have smaller and less frequent litters in lean times. Given that chum used to provide a high percentage of salmon to these bears, its decline could result in fewer bears and less resilient populations over time.

Bears drive productivity within coastal streams and forests by transferring salmon carcasses from streams to the forest floor, providing nutrients and energy to the entire stream and stream-side foodwebs, including insects, birds, mammals and other fish. In terms of nutrients, 310 metric tons of discarded chum salmon translates to 9 metric tons



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of nitrogen and 1 metric ton of phosphorous, 80% of which would have been of delivered by bears to the forest.

The economic value of spawning salmon

The rising popularity of wildlife ecotourism is suggesting that salmon may be worth more to coastal economies alive than dead. Wildlife ecotourism has grown impressively in the past 20 years. The number of operations bringing tourists to see BC's coastal bears has more than quadrupled since the 1990s and local First Nations have been an important component of this growth. This promising new economic activity requires healthy, functioning ecosystems with diverse and abundant salmon populations. Greater salmon numbers means greater numbers of bears, increasing and protecting economic opportunities for eco-tourism bear-viewing and other salmon-reliant activities.

Sustainable salmon fisheries are possible

Changing the way we fish for salmon could significantly reduce impacts to stocks of concern, like chum salmon in the Great Bear Rainforest. This could be achieved by moving fisheries away from "mixed-stock" fishing areas where it is impossible to target strong stocks while avoiding stocks of concern, by employing well-proven selective fishing techniques, and by transitioning to quota-based fisheries (instead of the antiquated competitive fisheries now occurring on BC's north coast). In many other BC fisheries all boats must have on-board independent observers or video cameras to monitor by-catch and compliance with fishing regulations. The sustainability of BC's salmon fisheries would benefit from similar measures.