



Secwepemc and St'a'timc Territory, Big Bar Slide Site
July 2019, Courtesy of the Incident Command Post



BIG BAR LANDSLIDE INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT UPDATE FROM GREG WITZKY

In 2019 when the Big Bar Landslide was discovered fish were observed migrating beyond the slide until the flood event that occurred in early July resulting in extreme high water from the Chilcotin River. Following that 200 year storm event we know that fish were then not getting through until human intervention started around mid-July. The already endangered early timed spring Chinook and Early Stuart Sockeye returns were the hardest hit by the landslide due to delays in their migration timing. Very low numbers of fish arriving at the spawning grounds revealed that these early runs were particularly impacted by the slide. The physical handling of salmon while loading them into helicopter lift tanks would have compounded their already elevated stress levels. Similar stress levels would have been experienced by fish almost 100 years ago when Indigenous peoples at the Hells Gate Landslide assisted with fish passage efforts then. It took decades for the salmon numbers to rebound from Hells Gate, and some runs never did.

By the time the 2019 Big Bar Landslide emergency incident mitigation efforts were applied around mid-July some salmon had already spent more than a month trying to get past the obstruction. This relentless effort exhausted their energy reserves, and even with the human intervention and assistance to help many past the slide these salmon did not have the strength required to make it home to spawn. They perished along the way and likely became food for other species, continuing the circle of life along the way.

Because the landslide caused an extreme high water velocity barrier in an already very narrow and remote area of the river it was deemed necessary by the tri-partite collaboration of First Nations, Federal and Provincial governments to undertake winter construction works to remove in-river rock debris and widen the channel with blasting operations. The winter construction, while successful in the deliverables identified, were not quite successful enough to allow unimpeded fish passage during spring freshet flows. In response, a government to government to government decision was made to prepare for that uncertainty.

Significant amounts of work have been completed since the landslide was first discovered with the express purpose of helping salmon get past the obstruction. The extreme 2019/2020 snow pack in the watersheds of the northeast Fraser has compounded the problem by contributing to high freshet volumes and increased velocities which, coupled with recent extreme rain storm events will create an impediment to fish passage.

Very small numbers of early timed Chinook salmon have been observed below the landslide and hydroacoustic (sonar) monitoring has been implemented to count the number of salmon successfully passing through the landslide, if any. Radio tags will also be applied to some salmon downstream of the landslide to help monitor passage as well as arrival to the spawning areas.

Many of the monitoring and transportation activities will be assumed by Indigenous fisheries technicians working through various First Nations fisheries organizations downstream, on-site, and upstream of the landslide. Monitoring is essential to helping us understand whether landslide mitigation methods carried out over the winter were successful and how effective the planned methods to assist fish over the slide will be this season.

The current efforts designed to assist salmon over the landslide are a direct result of the completed winter construction works. That winter work allowed us to build an exceptionally large level rock platform and also assemble a cement block salmon passage structure in preparation for the implementation of a pneumatic (air/water filled) fish pump system (WHOOSHH™). A back up truck and transport system is in place to assist the fish pump method if required. Indigenous leaders, elders, fishers, knowledge holders, youth, technicians, spiritual heads, professionals, contractors, managers and coordination staff have been directly involved with almost all aspects of the Big Bar Landslide incident since it was first reported on June 23rd, 2019.

With the one year anniversary fast approaching, the innovative Indigenous engagement and governance decision making processes will again be instrumental to the collaborative tri-partite government model developed to mitigate the incident, and help fish get past the landslide for generations to come.

It has been a consensus decision by the Big Bar Landslide tri-partite collaboration that fisheries management issues will not be addressed through the current partnership, which is purposed with mitigating the landslide incident only. It is critical to understand that the returns of salmon, forecast for this 2020 season are again expected to be very low and that additional management measures to protect these fish will be required.

CLICK LINK TO SEE DRONE FOOTAGE FROM JUNE 4, 2020

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NGE2dvAo5J_WnI-LxS_Tq5XPt--JLIEk/view?usp=sharing

First Nations constitutionally protected rights-based fisheries have priority over all other fishery openings second only to conservation. It is unlikely there will be any significant commercial opportunities on Fraser bound salmon in 2020. However, recreational fisheries continue to occur in the marine waters with impacts from retention fisheries as well as additional impacts from catch and release fisheries. The recreational impacts pose a profoundly serious fisheries management issue for the preservation and recovery of these salmon stocks that have been in peril for a number of years, an issue further compounded by the Big Bar Slide. Considering these issues, what additional mitigation strategies could be considered by DFO in response to achieving successful natural fish passage beyond the slide, especially when every fish counts! The argument that social and economics are major considerations to keeping fisheries open for the recreational sector will not be an issue if we do not have any salmon for the future.



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Fraser Salmon Management Council

Mailing Address: PO Box 188 Merritt BC V1K 1B8

Website: www.frasersalmon.ca

For more information email communications@frasersalmon.ca

