

Status of the legally binding decision of 2001 and 'best' option

The NWC raised the point that the lack of funds should not remove the WRF as the 'best' option nor sidestep the point of a cold water release facility as a legally binding decision made in 2001.

With regard to a WRF as the 'best' option, the NEEF MC has been given a mandate to identify options for environmental enhancement – we have not reached any conclusions on what the 'best' options might be. Our focus is to identify options and make recommendations regarding implementation. Once a variety of options have been identified we will endeavour to evaluate the benefits of each. As for the legally binding decision of 2001 to construct a Cold water release facility - if both parties to the BC/Alcan 1997 Agreement (Province and Rio Tinto Alcan) agree, they can ask the NEEF MC to reconsider its decisions (the parties themselves cannot change the decisions). As such the NEEF MC has been asked to consider all enhancement options and we have agreed to do so.



Photo: Upper Nechako River.

Environmental health of the Nechako watershed

There is a lot of information regarding the health of the Nechako River, much of which we have made available on our website. There are literally hundreds of reports providing information related to the Nechako watershed under the categories of; aquatic vegetation, Cheslatta watershed, cold water release facility, fisheries – general, fisheries – habitat, fisheries – adult Chinook, fisheries – juvenile Chinook, fisheries – Sockeye, fisheries – salmonids, fisheries – White Sturgeon, forestry, geology, geomorphology, heritage resources, hydrology, Nechako Reservoir, ranching, water quality, watershed management, wildlife, birds & insects. We encourage you to go to the website and browse through this literature for subjects of interest to you. Many of the reports can be downloaded. If there is a report you would like to read that is not available through the website please let us know and we will source it for you.

Our address is:

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or email to administrator@neef.ca

www.neef.ca

We would like to hear from you!

Please let us know if you plan to attend the public meeting and workshop on March 29 in Vanderhoof.



Photo: Skins Lake Spillway.



Nechako Environmental Enhancement Fund

March 19, 2012

We want your input!

The NEEF Management Committee invites you to its next public meeting and workshop on **March 29 at 6:30 PM in the Nechako Senior Friendship Centre** in Vanderhoof. We want to continue to receive your ideas and comments regarding options for the use of the Nechako Environmental Enhancement Fund (NEEF). The objectives of the public workshop are:

- 1) to provide everyone an opportunity to engage in a discussion regarding environmental enhancement,
- 2) raise any concerns and express interests related to the health of the Nechako watershed, and,
- 3) to identify options for environmental enhancement the NEEF Management Committee should consider.

We would like to hear from you! Please let us know if you plan to attend the public meeting and workshop on March 29 in Vanderhoof. If you cannot attend we encourage you to send us your thoughts in writing, or contact us by telephone.

The workshop will be lead by facilitators, and structured to allow small groups to discuss relevant information, explore and understand each other's interests, and to raise proposals for options for the use of the NEEF.

NECHAKO ENVIRONMENTAL ENHANCEMENT FUND

PHASE 2 - CONSULTATION

We have developed a short questionnaire in order to get a better sense of your environmental priorities. The questionnaire is posted on our website and will also be available at the workshop. Please take the time to complete and send it to us or simply drop it off at the Rio Tinto Alcan office in Burns Lake or Vanderhoof. The questionnaire can also be completed and submitted on-line and will be discussed at the beginning of the workshop.

To help you prepare for the workshop we provide here a summary of information provided to us by the Nechako Fisheries Conservation Program and the Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative. Both presentations are available on the NEEF website. Also provided below are our preliminary responses to questions and comments we received through our first round of meetings in January.



Photo: Nechako River at Vanderhoof.

Nechako Fisheries Conservation Program (NFCP)

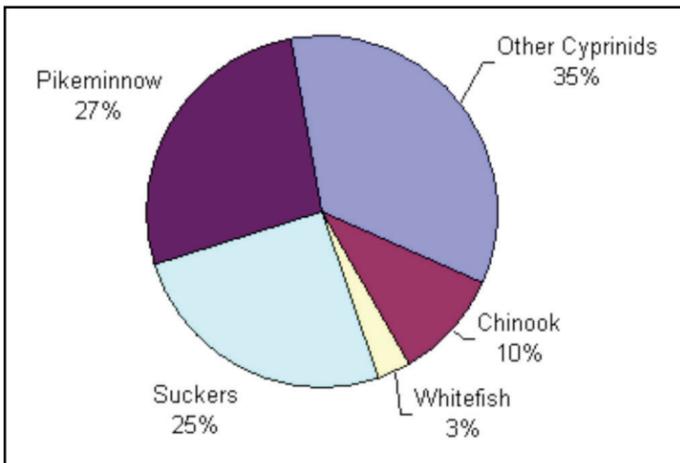
The NFCP has been active since 1988 and is responsible for ensuring flow, temperature, and fish management targets are met for Chinook and sockeye salmon in the Nechako watershed. This involves Chinook salmon that spawn in the Nechako River and five stocks of sockeye salmon that use the Nechako River as part of their migration route. The NFCP has produced more than 150 technical reports. In summary the NFCP has concluded the following:

“ ... it is the opinion of the [NFCP] Technical Committee that the current in-river conditions are sufficient to sustain a population of Chinook salmon that fluctuates generally within the “target” population range identified by the Conservation Goal.”

“ ... the spirit and intent of the Conservation Goal has been met.”

The NFCP also offered us some insight into the idea of a ‘healthy river’. Defining a healthy river is difficult - enhancement options need to consider all species and the effect of enhancement options on the entire river over time. In that regard the NFCP presented information on the approximate ratio of fish abundance for various species in the Nechako River. The fish data shown below were integrated from numerous beach seine sampling campaigns conducted in 1979 - 1980. The major component of the fish community was non-salmonid fish which could respond to downstream enhancement. This data is presented here only to illustrate that environmental enhancement is a complex issue.

Graph: Nechako River fish species assemblage 1979-1980.



Nechako White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative (NWSRI)

The NWSRI has been working since 1999 towards development and implementation of a recovery strategy to preserve and restore the Nechako White Sturgeon population which is listed as endangered under the federal Species at Risk Act. The NWSRI has made significant progress towards understanding potential causes of the population’s decline. The leading theory is that fine sediment accumulation in the spawning area is causing mortality of sturgeon eggs and larvae. They have also identified actions that can be taken to prevent extinction and address habitat improvement to allow the population to survive naturally.



Photo: Juvenile Nechako white sturgeon ready for release from the Vanderhoof pilot recovery facility (September 2006).

Significant progress has also been made towards harm reduction – protecting the adults that are left in the population. The sport fishery has been closed for more than twelve years, and recent initiatives with First Nations who occasionally capture sturgeon in salmon nets have reduced incidental mortality of sturgeon.

A key point that NWSRI left us with is that protecting Sturgeon – saving them from extinction in the Nechako River - is very time sensitive. It is estimated that it will be too late to conserve the population unless action is taken in the next few years; but the prospect of success is high if action is taken now.

Sediment, flow and health of the river

One subject of study common to the NFCP, NWSRI and also the Nechako Watershed Council (NWC) is the quality of sediment in the Nechako River as it relates to fish habitat, and the consequence of flow and sediment on the river environment (geomorphology). A variety of projects and studies over the years have identified river sediment (substrate) to be very important for river health and specific fish species. This subject is significant in many ways and needs continued attention. We have concluded that geomorphology is a key consideration in potential enhancement opportunities and as such we will be consulting specifically on this issue with technical experts.

NEEF MC process

The Cheslatta Carrier Nation (CCN) and NWC expressed concerns regarding the NEEF MC’s investigation of options other than a water release facility (WRF) at Kenney Dam and the proposed timeline. The CCN has asked the NEEF MC to suspend its work and any plans to disperse funds until September 1, 2012 to allow them time to collaborate with industry partners and develop a business case for a WRF and hydro-electric generation station at Kenney Dam.

Our full response to Cheslatta Carrier Nation is available on the NEEF website. In summary we offered the following perspective:

“...In previous discussions and communications with the CCN the NEEF MC clarified that it was given a mandate to reconsider previous NEEF decisions for use of the fund, and consider all options for environmental enhancement in addition to a water release facility. The committee also stated that, as a result of the previous NEEF process and subsequent years of study, the environmental benefits of a water release facility at Kenney Dam are largely known. The NEEF MC therefore envisions the report it is mandated to deliver will identify that the option of a water release facility remain a consideration for the use of NEEF.”

“From the ten years of work done by the Nechako Watershed Council, including the CCN, we know the cost of a water release facility will far exceed the value of the NEEF. We do not view it as critical to have a new cost estimate or business plan for a WRF prior to making decisions on additional options...”

Benefits of a water release facility (WRF) at Kenney Dam

Comments from BC Nature centred on the ambiguity of what the benefits of a WRF would be for the Nechako River, and for sturgeon. BC Nature noted that the NEEF MC needs to clarify the effects of a WRF on the Nechako River.

In response, many studies were commissioned to understand the effects of a WRF and in general concluded the following:

- A WRF would allow for rehabilitation of the Cheslatta watershed by removing the large volume of flows released from Skins Lake Spillway.
- A WRF would rewater the Nechako canyon downstream of Kenney Dam.
- A WRF would be more efficient at releasing flows to the Nechako River.
- Greater efficiency could in some years translate into some water savings.
- The shape of the hydrograph would not change – Summer Temperature Management would still require high flows in the summer.
- The majority of benefits to the Nechako River that were originally anticipated from construction of a cold water release facility at Kenney Dam will not be realized.

In summary, it appears that the environment of the Nechako River would not be substantially altered by constructing a WRF nor are there identified benefits of a WRF for sturgeon. The modest water savings realized in some years would not be noticeable. It is also our understanding that releasing flows from a WRF would increase the risk to fish and fish habitat in the Nechako River as a result of sediments that have accumulated upstream of Cheslatta Falls being flushed downstream. Therefore, the option of a WRF needs to be evaluated on its own merits alongside other options.