

My name is Dennis Ableson and I am a retired fisheries biologist. I am 71 years of age and have spent almost my entire professional career working with environmental issues, particularly with reference to freshwater fisheries issues. With respect to the topic under discussion I began working on fisheries issues associated with the Nechako River in 1980 and have been associated with that watershed in that capacity ever since, although I will admit that in recent years I have drastically cut back on my involvement therein. There is no doubt that I can stand before you today and unequivocally state that there is no biologist in the province of B.C. that has spent more time working on the Nechako River and within its watershed than myself. Having said that, let me assure you that I don't have all the answers, just a lifetime of experience and knowledge.

I am not speaking on behalf of any organization, be it the Carrier Sekanni Tribal Council (CSTC), the Cheslatta First Nation or the B.C. Wildlife Federation. Rather I speak for myself on behalf of the Nechako River. When I attend meetings like this, I hear the presentations of many very knowledgeable and respected professionals. Many of them I know personally. They are good people. However unfortunately many of them have often become too focused on a single issue and are incapable of looking at the whole picture. Let me be very specific in this regard.

A number of years ago when President Bill Clinton was seeking re-election to his second term in office, on the heels of his problems with Monica and a host of other problems, his election committee held a series of strategy sessions where they attempted to define the essential issues of the upcoming campaign. One advisor, James Carville, is reported to have heatedly remarked: "The issue, stupid, is the the economy". Well you all know the rest of the story in that regard. If I can seize upon that analogy for a minute and transpose it to the Nechako, my comment would be the "fundamental issue is and always has been, the habitat." "We can talk about any other topic in the watershed you wish; we can talk about the status of white sturgeon, rainbow trout, Dolly Varden char, bull trout, mountain whitefish, chinook salmon or sockeye salmon; in all of these discussions eventually recognition would be made that each and every one of those species is in a perilous status, and they have been in that position quite frankly ever since 1950. More than a decade ago many of us who had fought against the proposed Kemano Completion project rejoiced when the government of the day cancelled the project. Mistakenly many of us thought that momentous decision heralded a new dawn, one in which the Nechako River and its watershed would be restored to a semblance of its original character. The most important tributary to the most important salmon producing river in the world had been saved and we could look forward to its restoration.

I stand before you today and note that nothing could be farther from the truth and the Nechako River is as much a destroyed river today as it has been for many decades. I think a case can even be made that perhaps it is worse! Each and every one of the fish species associated with this mighty and once wonderful river is at peril and unless something is done and done soon, the future existence of many of those stocks is questionable. Already we have the official designation of sturgeon populations as reproductively endangered; 2011 recorded the lowest numbers of Early Stuart sockeye on record; Endako chinook can be classified as functionally extinct; rainbow trout in the upper Nechako are a mere fraction of their potential abundance level; and Nechako chinook populations continue to exist in keeping with an artificially adopted population status which totally disregards any enhancement opportunities. I want to state very clearly that it is not the mandate of the federal fisheries department to manage fish populations to extinction. And yet that is exactly what has been happening in British



Columbia. Surely many of you are familiar with the report of Dr. Carl Walters, one of the provinces most distinguished salmon biologists, in which he identified that 30% of the Strait of Georgia coho populations had become extinct within a twenty year time period . Well, let us be honest with ourselves, what makes you think things are different with the Nechako?

Earlier I stated that habitat was the critical common theme to all fish species within the Nechako watershed. Unless that habitat is protected and enhanced any and all management efforts are doomed to failure.

The single greatest habitat issue associated with the Nechako watershed that has not been adequately addressed is the flow regime in the river. That was what the fight over Kemano Completion was all about and the flows proposed by Alcan had been recognized by many, not the least of were the CSTC and the Cheslatta Nation, as woefully inadequate. With the cancellation of that project, the existing Injunction flows have continued to dominate the river. I want to go on the record right now as stating that those Injunction flows are part of the problem the fish populations in the Nechako are facing. Remember, they were originally argued before the courts to be applicable to one species of salmon, sockeye. Along the way they were modified to reflect some concerns for chinook salmon. So in the final analysis, the Injunction flows relate to two species of fish only. Tragically all other fish species in the Nechako River were never considered and today, as far as river flows are concerned, aren't even on the table of discussion. Today we continue to regulate the flow volumes in the Nechako River with a primary emphasis upon a summer temperature at the Stuart River confluence- a major and important sockeye salmon consideration; September flows are modified to reflect spawning chinook salmon in the Upper Nechako and winter flows are regulated for overwintering chinook egg incubation and anticipated spring floods. The Nechako River has been so mismanaged that the biological processes normally found in a healthy river environment no longer exist. Think about this for a minute. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to appreciate what I am about to say. Each and every one of you knows, from your personal experiences that this is so. In a normal river, flows increase in the spring, the river carries an annual freshwater load of sediments and nutrients and the substrate gravels are moved and cleansed. As water temperatures rise in May and June, and water levels stabilize, a host of exciting biological processes takes place. Aquatic plants, algae and periphyton flourish; aquatic insects evolve and grow and fish populations respond accordingly. The summer becomes the essential period of growth and renewal for all life within that aquatic environment. At present in the Nechako River, not only is this not occurring but tragically many of these life processes are being retarded. No wonder all of our fish populations are in trouble. Nechako summer flows are typically the highest of the year, the most turbid, and a far cry from a natural system. Attempting to control water temperatures in the Nechako River at the confluence of the Stuart River by releasing large volumes of water from a near surface level in the reservoir (Skins Spillway), allowing water to flow through Murray and Cheslatta lakes and take nine days to reach the Stuart is ridiculous. It doesn't work and it is no wonder that periodically we experience migration sockeye temperature related mortalities. This release system has no capability of ever getting better; no amount of fine tuning can be expected to fix a flawed system. It can, at best, perhaps maintain the status quo. Most likely it will contribute to a declining environmental situation.

The only solution to the disastrous flows in the Nechako River is a multi level release of water around Kenney Dam. Not only are reduced and stabilized flows out of Skins spillway an essential requirement for the restoration of the Cheslatta River and the downstream lakes, but re watering of the Nechako Canyon downstream of Kenney Dam will create 9 km of invaluable fish habitat in the uppermost regions of the river. Note: There are a number of technical issues associated with this structure, not the least of which are those related to the gravels within the Cheslatta fan. All of these

issues are resolvable however; let's get on with it.

A number of years ago a very distinguished federal fisheries biologist, Dr. Steve MacDonald completed an assessment of the Kenney Dam release facility and concluded that structure, contrary to what many people were advocating, would not resolve all the temperature concerns for sockeye salmon at the Stuart confluence. I do not take exception to his position per se except to state three things. Firstly, while he was correct in his assessment to caution about looking for the magic bullet with the water release proposal, surely such a structure would be an enormous improvement in temperature regulation from the present disastrous process. Secondly, as alluded to earlier, there are many other fish species within the Nechako River and the multi level water release facility has direct and positive implications to all of those populations. Thirdly, and surely this is intuitively obvious, there is much more to water releases than temperature and egg incubation for two species of fish.

Finally, I would conclude by asking each of us to take note of the very recent return of confiscated lands to the Cheslatta people. The reduced and stabilized flows from Skins Spillway is the only way that the Murray and Cheslatta rivers can be restored and Murray and Cheslatta lakes once again become healthy and biologically productive. Think for a moment of the enormous significance of such an achievement to the Nechako River itself. Think, if you wish, of the relationship of Francois Lake to the Stellako River, or Stuart Lake to the Stuart River. Think and dream as I have for so many years, of a restored and healthy Nechako River.

The fish of the Nechako River and the peoples who value and depend upon that resource, and the generations of their children yet unborn, thank you for your efforts to make this dream possible.