

Tuesday January 4, 2022

Attn: The Honourable Joyce Murray, MP
Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON
K1A 0A6

and

Attn: The Honourable John Horgan
Premier of British Columbia
P.O. Box 9041, Stn Prov Govt
Victoria, BC
V8W 9E1

**“Public Fishery Alliance Support of Skeena River Angling Access to Steelhead
and for a Comprehensive Skeena Steelhead Recovery Plan”**

Dear Minister Murray and Premier Horgan,

The Public Fishery Alliance is a broad-based angling advocacy organization that supports access to properly managed science-based fresh and saltwater angling opportunities, while advocating for the maintenance of healthy and sustainable salmon and trout stocks.

Steelhead are relatives of the salmon family. However, they are actually *anadromous* Rainbow Trout, meaning they stay in fresh water for several years before going to sea, and then they return to their natal streams to spawn. Unlike salmon, Steelhead can repeat this spawning process multiple times. They are an adaptable and resilient species under favorable conditions. Conversely, this life cycle pattern makes them repeatedly vulnerable to human and naturally occurring impacts.

Steelhead symbolize recreational angling in BC and are recognized around the world as an iconic angling species. This status brings important socio-economic benefits to local communities, which are often small and in remote areas of the province.

Estimates of pre-contact Skeena River Steelhead abundance suggest it may have exceeded 100,000. In recent decades escapements reached 30-40,000. However, there has been a gradual downward trend that has accelerated dramatically in the last two years. In 2021, the Skeena Steelhead escapement estimate was 5,461 from the test fishery at Tyee.

Skeena Steelhead stocks are caught as by-catch in commercial net fisheries in Alaska and northern BC. They are also caught by First Nations in-river Food, Social and Ceremonial (FSC) fisheries, and in-river recreational fisheries.

Recreational Steelhead *kill fisheries* were legal in the past. In spite of this, when anglers noticed declining escapements they lobbied for the abolishment of kill-fisheries in favor of the current *catch and*

release regulation. Steelhead specific angling regulations for the Skeena region are complex and are designed to significantly minimize angling efficiency (See link at the bottom of this letter).

Skeena region post-release mortality rates from catch and release fishing have been determined to be between 2.3% and 5%, depending primarily on hooking location, according to an extensive study on the Bulkley River, a Skeena tributary (W.M.Twardek et al).

In recent years significant management actions in Canadian commercial net fisheries have been implemented to minimize Steelhead “*by-catch*”.

Recreational anglers recognize and support First Nations constitutionally protected rights to Food, Social and Ceremonial fisheries. However, while fishing legitimately for other abundant salmon species, the 2021 known gillnet caused by-catch mortality of Steelhead was reported to be **1914** (Source DFO). This represents approximately 36% of the return.

Skeena River anglers believe this rate of incidental Steelhead mortality is unsustainable.

There are other factors impacting Skeena Steelhead:

- Ocean survival conditions are playing a major role and, in particular, impact far ocean migrating Steelhead and salmon populations.
- While the Skeena region benefits from comparatively intact fish habitats. There are emerging habitat issues currently under study.

Unfortunately, these are longer term problems without immediate actionable solutions. The present goal must be to focus on solutions that are achievable now. These include:

- **Stakeholder buy-in of selective fishing technologies:** Such as in-river fish trap design advancements that are being jointly explored by First Nations and private interests to eliminate gillnet by-catch. These activities need senior governments’ financial support.
- **Developing a Regional Recovery Plan:** A comprehensive Skeena Steelhead recovery plan does not exist. It must be developed immediately with input and support from all user groups. (**Fishing closure is not a recovery plan:** It is a solution for managers to avoid doing the work).
- **Committed coordination and cooperation between Fisheries and Oceans and the Province:** This is currently devolving into a non-productive relationship that does not benefit steelhead or fisheries.
- **Ensuring adequate funding for the Provincial fisheries department:** It is underfunded and understaffed which weakens all facets of fishery management activities and priorities.
- **Developing joint government/regional stakeholder driven solutions, and prioritizing those over lobbying from outside influences with other agendas.**
- **There must be a timely, properly funded process put in place** where all stakeholders can meet, discuss and make recommendations on agreed upon plans for Skeena Steelhead recovery.
- **Canada, through the Pacific Salmon Commission process, must aggressively advance Canadian origin Steelhead by-catch concerns occurring in Alaskan net fisheries that target salmon; in particular the accuracy of extremely low reported Steelhead mortalities.**

The Skeena angling community is extremely concerned that the iconic Skeena River Steelhead could follow the tragic downward spiral that devastated Interior Fraser River Steelhead stocks. Anglers are

equally sure that recovery will not occur if management actions are placed solely on the backs of the angling community. This is a regional problem, requiring regional solutions with meaningful help and commitment from senior governments.

Yours in conservation,



signed on behalf of the Board of Directors

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Director
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Chris@publicfisheryalliance.ca

Copied to:

Taylor Bachrach – MP, Skeena-Bulkley Valley, NDP
Ken McDonald – MP, Avalon, Liberal (Chair FOPO)
Lisa Marie Barron – MP, Nanaimo-Ladysmith, NDP (FOPO)
Rick Perkins – MP, South Shore-St. Margarets, Conservative (Fisheries Critic & Vice Chair FOPO)
Bob Zimmer – MP, Prince George-Peace River-Northern Rockies, Conservative (FOPO)
Mel Arnold – MP, North Okanagan-Shuswap, Conservative (FOPO)
Patrick Weiler – MP, West Vancouver – Sunshine Coast – Sea to Sky Country.
Jordan Sturdy – MLA, West Vancouver – Sea to Sky
Lana Popham – MLA, Saanich South, NDP (Minister of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries)
Nathan Cullen – MLA, Stikine, NDP (Minister of Lands and Natural Resource Operations)
Katrine Conroy – MLA, Minister of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development
Finn Donnelly – MLA, Coquitlam-Burke Mountain NDP (Parliamentary Sec. Fisheries and Aquaculture)
Rebecca Reid – DFO Regional Director General (Pacific Region)
Trevor Rhodes – BC FLNR -Associate Director of Fisheries

Resources:

Link: Steelhead Angling Regulations - [www.gov.bc.ca/Fishing Regulations](http://www.gov.bc.ca/Fishing%20Regulations) Skeena Region 6 p 49-57.

Appendix: 1 – Recommended Steelhead release when angling

Appendix: 2 - Selective Fishing System Diagrams – Courtesy Peter Krahn

Appendix: 1 – Recommended Steelhead release when angling



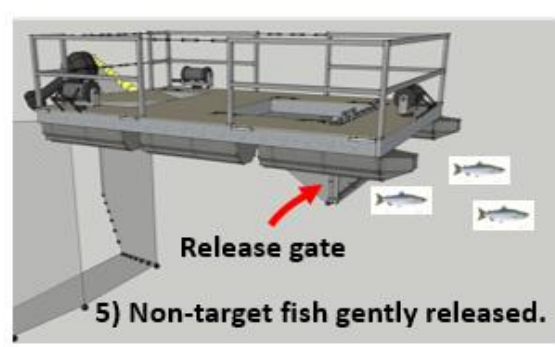
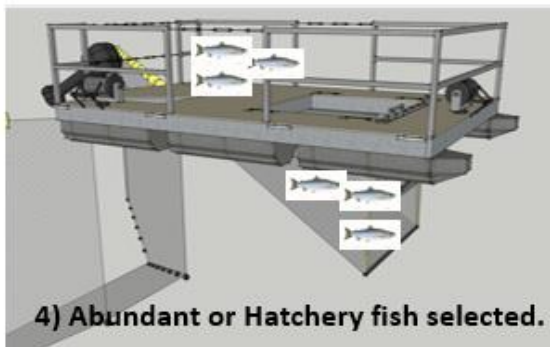
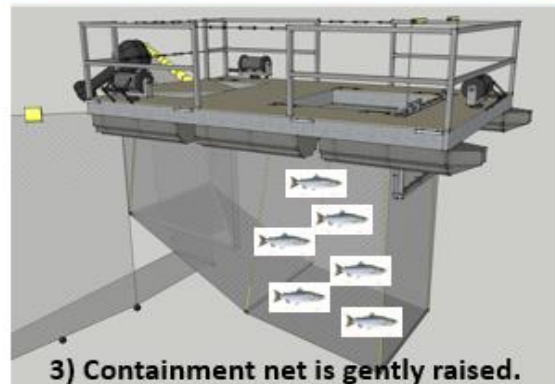
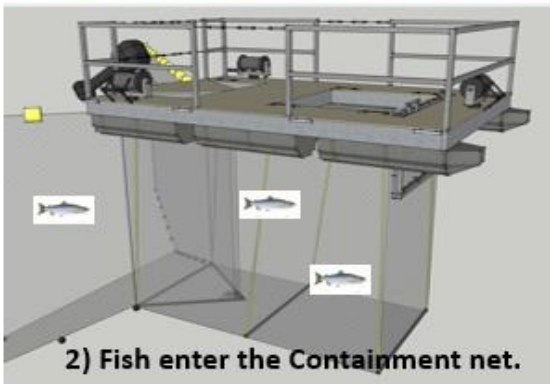
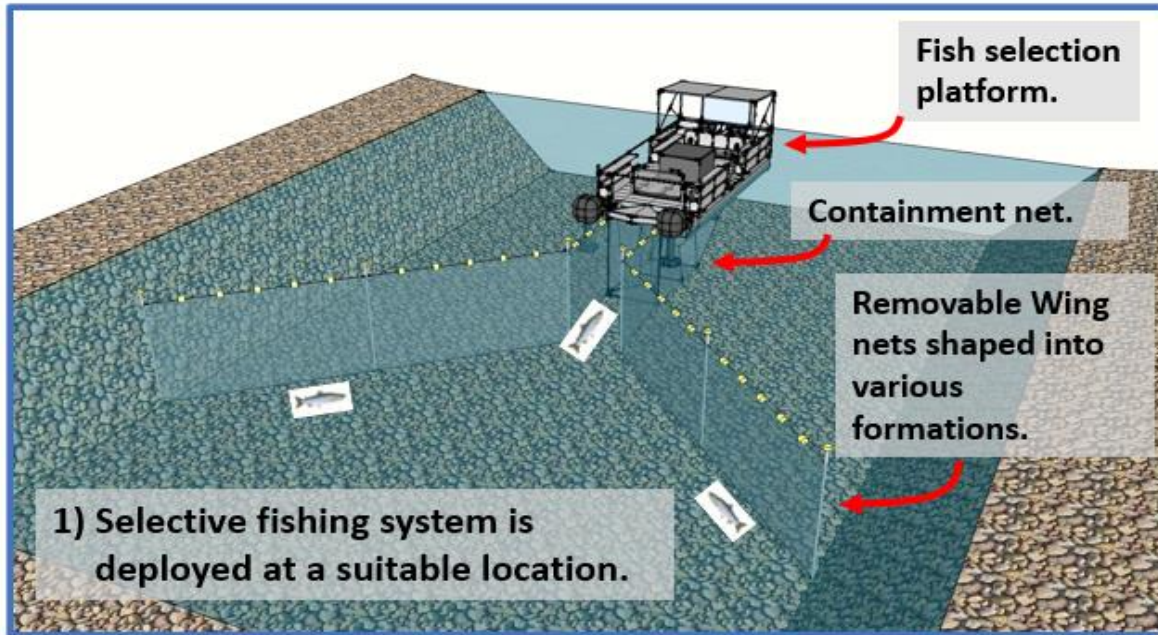
Recommended Steelhead Handling & Release Procedures

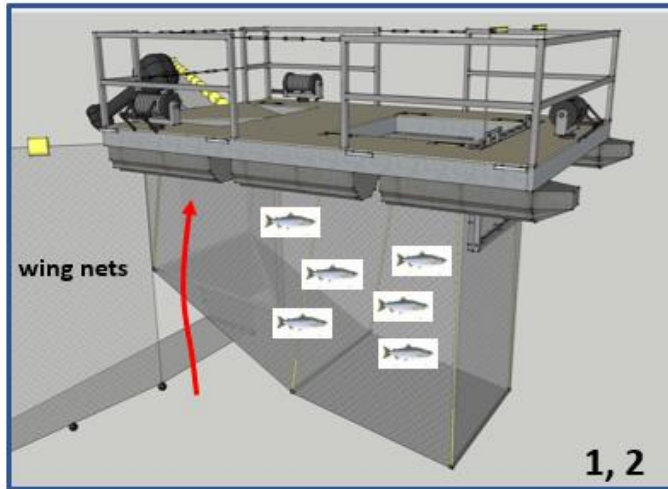
- Reduce fish landing time.
- Minimize fish handling.
- Wet hands before handling.
- Use soft small-mesh knotless landing nets or cradles.
- Keep the fish in the water to minimize out of water exposure time.
- Minimize photo time or do not take photos.
- Keep fish facing upstream.
- Hold the tail in one hand with a light grip.
- Use the other hand to support the fish below the pectoral fins.
- Avoid the gills.
- Avoid release in shallow rocky water.
- Fish with small single barbless hooks.

“After releasing the fish take a moment to appreciate the incredible journey this fish is on. Be grateful and thankful for this encounter” (Alex Bussmann-Smithers, BC).

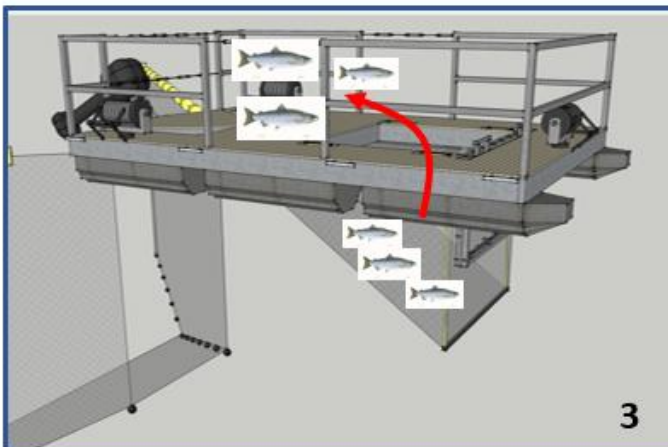
Appendix 2 – Selective Fishing System Diagrams – Courtesy Peter Krahn

Selective Fisheries Research – Basic Operational Schematic

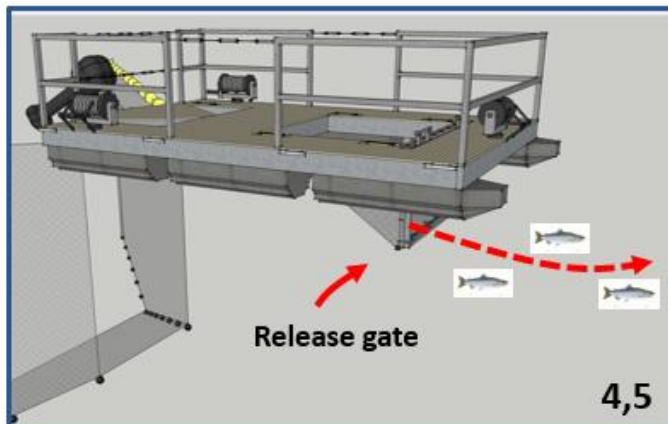




- 1) Selective fish traps are designed to be transportable and scalable to the physical situation and can be removed when the season is over.
- 2) Fish are guided by wing nets into the selective fish trap and when full, a containment net is gently raised to move them to the front.



- 3) Soft mesh dip nets are used to select out abundant harvestable fish such as hatchery raised Chinook or Coho which can be identified by a clipped adipose fin.



- 4) Endangered fish such as wild Fraser River Chinook, Sockeye or Thompson River or Skeena River Steelhead are allowed to escape via a release gate. These fish have not been touched by human hands or exposed to air and are fit to swim to spawning grounds.
- 5) Scientific equipment for stock assessment, capture of brood stock or measurement of fish health can be added to the platform to assist scientists and regulators to manage the fishery.