

Our Winlaw meeting ...

Winlaw Hall, July 23, 2003, was the site of Brilliant Expansion Power Corporation's (BEPC's) second Community Information Update. Most of the 30+ attendees had not participated in our first meeting at Passmore, but were keenly interested in the proposed Slocan River habitat enhancement program.

Gerry Oliver, working with Golder Associates as a fisheries consultant to BEPC, explained how the program will respond to agency requirements to compensate for potential fish entrainment mortality at the expansion powerhouse. Gerry summarized last year's field investigations and the resulting site-specific structures designed to provide habitat for 250 sub-adult and adult rainbow trout.



Habitat compensation structure (visible portion) on Elk River at Elko, BC. Would this structure be acceptable on the Slocan?

Though generally recognizing the program need and its objectives, participant discussion focused mainly on non-fisheries issues. Concerns were strongly expressed that the type and location of the proposed structures (or indeed any structures) would make them obstacles to canoeing and a risk to recreational tubers, many of whom are from outside the Valley. As program alternatives, fish stocking, riparian restoration and public education were all proposed.

One well-known long-time observer summarized various past failures to restore a viable Slocan River fishery. He concluded by saying "this program won't be enough by itself, but the structures can't harm the river – they just may help it".

Brilliant Expansion Project Update

Since project construction started in April 2003, the left bank site access road has been completed and is being used to haul excavation rock to Kootenay Quarry near Highway 3A. The Ministry of Transportation will use much of this rock on future provincial highway improvement projects.

Blasting is underway to shape the left bank for the powerhouse structure. Work has also commenced underground on the vehicle access tunnel that will connect the powerhouse to the existing roadway across the dam.

Fisheries Act Authorization has been received allowing in-river construction to occur from October through March each year, as needed. Work this year will involve temporarily placing clean rock in the river to facilitate building a berm to protect powerhouse construction activities, and to permit safe excavation of the project's tailrace channel.

Questions and Answers

In addition to expressing views and opinions, participants asked a number of questions. Key questions and answers are summarized following:

Why so many structures in one area?

Each structure is expected to support 10 to 12 fish. Accordingly 25 structures are needed to support the compensation target of 250 fish. Consolidating structures in one area maximizes their effectiveness and makes it easier to monitor their success.

Experience has shown that widely distributing the structures may cause existing fish to relocate rather than multiply. Installation of structures in two phases will allow a preliminary assessment of effectiveness before all structures are installed.

Putting these structures in the river does not seem natural -- what are they made of?

The structures attempt to replicate the natural woody debris habitat features and the erosion found in undisturbed river channels. They will be constructed mostly of local trees and rocks.

I use the river as my water supply - will water quality be affected?

There will be no adverse effects on water quality.

Are the structures hazardous?

The structures will occupy a small part of the river (less than 20% of channel width during low flows). They will be anchored to the bottom, generally along channel margins, and marked by buoys if not always visible. River access points in the area of the program will be sign-posted. No accidents have been recorded involving such habitat enhancement structures in the Kettle and Salmo Rivers.

Who will be liable if there are any injuries?

Installation will only proceed on receipt of all necessary federal and provincial approvals, including authorization from the Canadian Coast Guard. Liability is a legal issue that is dependent on the circumstances that may exist at the time.

How will we know if the program is successful?

Surveys and monitoring, to record fish use and numbers of fish produced, will be conducted to ensure the structures are functioning as intended.

What if the program isn't successful?

If, after a reasonable time, monitoring surveys indicate that the enhanced habitat is not being used, BEPC will remove the structures and restore the river channel to its pre-program condition. BEPC would then proceed with its contingency plan to support increased fertilization of Kootenay Lake.

Who will build these structures?

A competitive tendering process is anticipated that will provide an opportunity for local participation. The tender evaluation process will award points to proposals that minimize in-stream activities during structure placement.

How much will the program cost?

Sourcing, acquiring, transporting and assembling the materials will be expensive, as will be installing the structures. Exact costs are not known, but may well exceed \$100,000 excluding maintenance costs.

Why not do more fish stocking, or spend the money on other environmental programs?

Previous attempts at fish stocking failed to produce a viable Slocan fishery. For biological reasons, the introduction of hatchery fish is no longer provincial policy. Present federal and provincial policies focus on habitat restoration and enhancement as the preferred means to increase native fish populations. Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) requires that habitat compensation be directed as close as possible to the potential impact source -- in this case close to Brilliant Dam. Though money and effort might be usefully re-directed to riparian improvement and fish conservation education, the fisheries benefits would be longer term and hard to quantify as meeting BEPC's agency required compensation targets.

Next Steps

BEPC originally intended to seek final approvals for the proposed Slocan River Compensation Program in September. Based on recommendations from Slocan River Streamkeepers and others subsequent to the Winlaw meeting, and with the concurrence of DFO, BEPC has now decided to postpone its implementation plans for one year. The additional time will be used to seek, to analyze and, where possible, to incorporate additional community input. Hopefully also during this time, wider recognition can be gained of the ecosystem benefits expected.

To ask questions or express views please contact:

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