

PICES Advice on Marine Ecology at a Canadian Judicial Inquiry

by Stewart (Skip) McKinnell

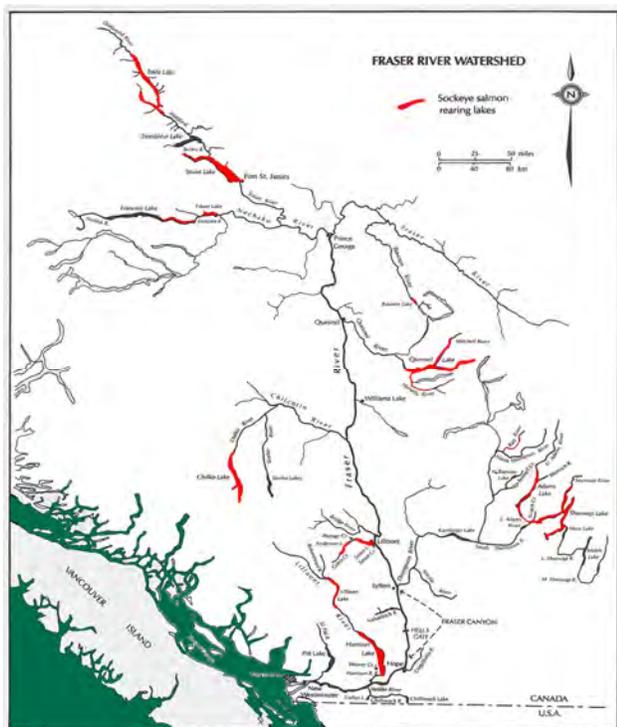


Fig. 1 Lakes (red) in the Fraser River watershed in British Columbia, Canada with sockeye salmon reproduction.

In November 2009, the Prime Minister of Canada established a commission of inquiry to discover why Fraser River sockeye salmon are not as abundant as they once were, especially from 2007 to 2009. As the investigation is being conducted by B.C. Supreme Court judge, Bruce Cohen, it has taken his name (www.cohencommission.ca). His mandate is to examine the effect of environmental changes along the Fraser River and in the ocean, the potential effects of aquaculture, predators, diseases, water temperature and other factors that may have affected the ability of sockeye salmon to reach traditional spawning grounds or to reach the ocean. He is also examining the current state of Fraser River sockeye salmon stocks and the long-term projections for those stocks to develop recommendations for improving sustainability of the sockeye salmon fishery in the Fraser River (Fig. 1), including changes to the policies, practices and procedures of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO).

Seeking to obtain advice that is produced independently of the organizations that manage and assess the fishery, 12 groups of scientists from universities and the private sector were invited to conduct research and offer their views on specific issues. The Chairman of PICES received an invitation from Mr. Cohen to develop a report on Fraser River sockeye salmon in relation to marine ecology. The invitation was accepted by the PICES Science Board at its April 2010 inter-session meeting in Sendai, Japan, where Skip McKinnell, Deputy Executive Secretary of PICES, was asked to lead the initiative. Work began in late June 2010 with an esteemed team of co-authors that included: Enrique Curchitser (Rutgers University), Kees Groot (DFO emeritus), Masahide Kaeriyama (Hokkaido University), and Katherine W. Myers (University of Washington). The three major objectives of the report were to: (1) provide a summary of what is known about the biology and ecology of Fraser River sockeye salmon in the ocean, (2) describe why returns were especially low in 2009, and (3) discuss the nature and cause(s) of low productivity during the last 15 years. While the report was being written last summer, an approximation of the 2010 abundance was added to the time series (Fig. 2) which invited additional comment by the authors of the report.

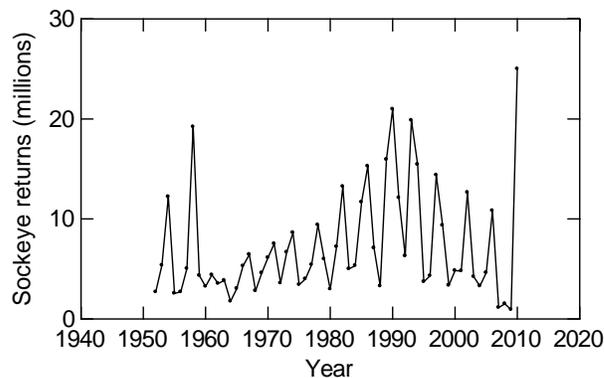


Fig. 2 Annual numbers of sockeye returning to the Fraser River.

Testimony at court on the PICES report is currently scheduled for July 2011. At press time, PICES Press was not at liberty to disclose its contents but it will be reported in a subsequent issue.

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 E-mail: secretariat@pices.int <http://www.pices.int>