STEELHEAD SOCIETY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

ROUNDTABLE REPORT

JANUARY, 2015

By Eric Carlisle

Of great concern to the Steelhead Society of British Columbia and, for that matter, anyone who cares about fish, is an event, whether man caused or natural, which prevents salmon and steelhead from migrating up a river. Such an event occurred on the morning of December 7, 2014, with the failure of the west side wall partway down North Vancouver's Seymour River Canyon. An estimated 50,000 cubic meters of debris and rock, including a house sized boulder, fell into the riverbed. This natural partial dam backed up the river and created a lake which, during subsequent heavy rains and high flows, reached upstream past the canyon, covered the one bridge at the Twin Bridges site, and ended around the corner above the Elbow Pool (a distance of about one kilometre). For fish this slide appears to be a disaster—adult salmon and steelhead probably cannot migrate upstream and reach their spawning and rearing areas.

Most anglers who fish in rivers have a parent stream and a home stream. Unlike many anglers, I have two parent streams and two home streams. While I am best known for fishing Capilano River, during my youth I also discovered the charms of the nearby Seymour. Like the Capilano, the Seymour is home to summer as well as fall run coho salmon and summer and winter steelhead. Having these run combinations is extremely rare; many rivers have winter steelhead and fall coho runs and some rivers have summer steelhead populations, but the Capilano and Seymour are the only two I know of with both two runs of coho and two runs of steelhead.

The only fortunate aspect of this natural disaster is the timing—by December 7, practically all coho and summer steelhead should have already migrated upstream past the slide location. Since the slide, changes have occurred, the area has stabilized and I have heard that the house sized boulder has shifted position a little downstream of where it landed on December 7. Some observers feel fish now may be able to move up through the area and reach the house sized boulder, while other observers feel fish will not be able to move up through what appears to be almost a hundred feet of boiling white water and reach the big boulder. The river does not just flow over the boulder; rather, much of the flow goes under the boulder. In time the flow of the river might create fish passage through the slide area, but nobody knows for sure if all fish are affected now and how long this effect will last.

I feel the worst case scenario resulting from the Seymour slide would be upstream fish passage blocked and government paralysis preventing anything being done to alleviate the situation. The bottom line is if nothing is done and the slide area is impassable to salmon and steelhead migration for a period of years, after 2017 the Seymour would no longer be a coho river (except perhaps for a tiny remnant

population). Similarly, after 2018 and 2019, the Seymour would have very few winter steelhead (a few winter steelhead but not the whole run always spawn in the canyon or on the lower river) and after 2019 and 2020, summer steelhead would be practically extinct.

Trapping and trucking salmon and steelhead on the lower river is a possibility, but the difficulties would be enormous. A trapping facility would have to be effective in both very low and very high flows, and, given that the lower river flows through an urban environment, the question is, where could a fish trap be placed? In addition, each night armed guards would have to be present; otherwise, every poacher in the Lower Mainland would be trying to empty the fish trap.

People concerned about Seymour River's salmon and steelhead have to remember that Metro Vancouver looks after the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve, but the Department of Fisheries and Oceans manages salmon while the provincial Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations manages steelhead. My hope is that DFO and MFLNRO, with assistance from Metro Vancouver and Seymour Salmonid Society, will do whatever is necessary to save the Seymour's rare (and almost unique) runs of salmon and steelhead.

Since the slide, a meeting was held in the third week of December. Attending were representatives from DFO, MFLNRO, Metro Vancouver and Seymour Salmonid Society. Given the uncertainties regarding upstream fish passage, a decision was made to monitor the situation and commence a radio tagging program for winter steelhead. I understand that Seymour Hatchery received the radio tags (15) this past week. A receiving station will be installed upstream from the slide, and the hatchery's brood stock anglers will be asked to catch winter steelhead both for brood for the hatchery and for the radio tagging program. While I might prefer to hear that work on the slide will start as soon as the river drops to a low flow, monitoring makes sense, especially in these days of tight budgets or even no budgets. If radio tagging determines that fish cannot migrate upstream past the slide, then DFO and provincial staff can go to their political masters, say they have proof (the tagging results) that migrating fish are blocked by the slide and request the funding required to make the slide area passable for fish.

On January 27 Chair Sandie Hollick-Kenyon has called a meeting of the Seymour Roundtable. All the players—DFO, MFLNRO, SSS, Metro Vancouver, local governments, Squamish Nation—have been invited. At this meeting, I hope that the current slide situation will be thoroughly examined, decisions will be made and a plan of action to save Seymour River's treasured salmon and steelhead will be developed.