

Governments band together united in goal of saving fish

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Fish that swim in B.C. waters will be the big winners in a landmark partnership agreement among the Regional District, the provincial environment ministry and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to save environmentally sensitive areas from the perils of development.

The three-way memorandum of understanding is a first in B.C., and could set the stage for a new way of doing business by all three levels of government.

"We have never had all three agencies lined up shoulder to shoulder saying that environmental protection and land use management can go hand in hand," said RDC-S Director of Planning Harry Harker.

"There's no question that the development in this district is going to be more sensitive than it has been in the past."

Under the deal, DFO and the Ministry of Environment will provide the Regional District with maps identifying environmentally sensitive areas (ESA's) that can be presented to developers when they come in to fill out a permit application.

The three parties will then set

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DFO enhancement
official

up guidelines the Regional District can use when reviewing development proposals on the basis of their impact on aquatic habitat.

The new approach will try to stop the potential damage that can occur when development takes place in an ESA or near a fish-bearing stream before it actually happens.

The existing system of reviewing development proposals for environmental conservation has been plagued with time consuming referrals and often ineffective results.

(Cont. on page 3)

Regional district signing landmark fish agreement

(Cont. from page 1)

In most cases, concerned citizens or neighbours would call DFO to report a possible violation after a fish habitat has already been disturbed by development.

The agreement will be reviewed after two years, and then possibly expanded to include other environmental resources, said Harker.

Richard Higgins, a DFO habitat enhancement official called the agreement "potentially very significant" in terms of how levels of government will now "manage" the environment and environmental resources.

"There is no iron-clad guarantee," he said, "but we are all very excited and believe this is going to benefit the fish habitat greatly."

Geoff Chislett, a habitat protection officer with the Ministry of Environment, Land and Parks said the agreement will give all parties more time to deal with environment protection issues that are a top priority.

"We feel this will mean more time to deal with the workload that threatens to bog down each department," he said.

The agreement stipulates DFO and the Ministry of Environment contribute no less than two half-days per week towards providing regional district staff and the public with their expertise in habitat protec-

tion.

In terms of cash contributions to put the new process in place, the RDC-S will provide public access to their land-use information and maps, valued at \$4,500, and purchase equipment for GIS (geographic information system) mapping by way of a capital investment of \$6,000.

It will also cover the \$15,000 to keep the information data base updated with any new fisheries information.

Information on ESAs provided by both DFO and the ministry is valued at \$84,000

Under the agreement, all three parties will meet every two months to make decisions in cases where no guidelines exist, to talk about particularly sensitive areas or to make any changes to the existing guidelines.

The agreement does include a dispute mechanism and an opting out clause provided the sig-

natory gives six weeks notice.

In the fall, Harker said he plans to introduce a new development permit area bylaw to directors that would give the Regional District greater enforcement powers under the Municipal Act.

And although stricter consideration of environmental and habitat protection may sound like bad news to some developers, Harker said it all depends on how you look at it.

"Certainly there is a cost to environmental protection," he said, "but there is also a great marketing advantage to a project that is completely environmentally sound."

"The opportunity here is for the creative developer to get into a whole new niche in marketing...And with this deal, the fish are going to win for a change."

An official signing ceremony will take place later this month.