



Environment Minister Barry Penner speaks to Jack Minard of the Tsolum River Restoration Society on Saturday. Penner was in town to announce a 550,000 grant for an engineering report on capping the defunct Mt. Washington mine site

Group trying to save steelhead gets environment minister's ear

By Bill Macfarlane
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The Puntledge River Restoration Committee took advantage of having Environment Minister Barry Penner in town Saturday, enjoying some face to face discussion of their conservation concerns.

Penner was in town to announce a grant benefiting the Tsolum River and met with the group and senior ministry staff biologists following a brief helicopter tour of the Tsolum watershed.

The meeting was a chance for the

committee to get their desires and priorities in front of the minister while at the same time receiving feedback from the biologists.

"We don't know what's coming out of it. but we really like the exchange." said Larry Peterson of the Puntledge River group.

He said they discussed the health and challenges of the Puntledge system and the science behind it.

Peterson said if nothing else the discussion raises the profile of our local river system.

While the ministry of the environment is not responsible for salmon - a

federal fish they are responsible for steelhead and sea run cutthroat trout, an area of special concern for the group.

Peterson said he is happy with the help and support received from MLA Stan Hagen's office in co-ordinating the meeting.

Hagen could not attend the meeting Saturday due to the death of a friend on the mainland.

Peterson said Penner emphasized the need for biologists to work together with local knowledge to understand the dynamics of fish life in the river.

He said it was also revealed ministry

biologists have completed an inventory of the Browns River, a piece of work the conservation group has been looking to raise money for.

The biologists agreed to share the information from that survey and conduct a further swim of the river in July.

The Browns River is a major tributary of the Puntledge River.

Again, while salmon are not under provincial jurisdiction. 2005 turned out to be a good year overall for the Puntledge River said watershed enhancement manager Chris Beggs.

Just under 75,000 pink salmon returned to the river, along with 154,000 chum, more than double the target of 64,000.

More than double the 5,000 fish target for fall Chinook returned to the river, and 11,500 are believed to have spawned.

The darks spot on the river's returns were the coho which came back at roughly 25 per cent of normal - some thing seen up and down the east coast of Vancouver Island.

The Puntledge recorded just 4,150 coho, while over the past few years the hatchery has recorded roughly 21,000 per year.

Because of the widespread drop in numbers. Beggs said the salmon are almost certainly having trouble out at sea.

While high water temps on the Puntledge are responsible for periodic die offs among young salmon, the problem appears to come from outside the area.

"It's not really a site-specific thing so it's more likely to do with ocean conditions," Beggs said.

Ocean conditions are also being blamed for poor steelhead numbers, a point echoed by both environment minister Penner and Pacific Salmon Foundation executive director Paul Kariya.

Return numbers for steelhead in the Puntledge are not available, but anglers taking advantage of the catch and release fishery have reported modest success on the river this year.

"Even in the old days, compared to salmon, steelhead have been small numbers." Peterson said.

"Even on a bumper year in the old days you'd see maybe a thousand fish," he said.

"You get a fresh run steelhead and holy. . . compare it to any other beautiful thing on the planet and the other thing isn't any better."

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