

Six fish farms aid enhancement group

By QUENTIN DODD
Courier-Islander Reporter

Six fish farm companies have agreed to get together to help bail out a cash-stricken Oyster River salmonid enhancement program.

The Oyster River Enhancement Society came together in 1983 in large part to restore the river's heavily depleted salmon stocks.

But the federal government said some years ago that it's funding to the project under the Salmonid Enhancement Program would come to an end March 31 this year.

And that left the society having to find alternative sources of financial assistance if it was to continue the fisheries program it began with chinook salmon outplantings in 1986.

Now the society has announced that six fish farm companies with operations in this general area have agreed to replace the federal funding as a joint project, to ensure the society's program remains active.

Banding together on the program are Anchor Sea Farms, B.C. Packers, Paradise Bay, Noram, Pacific Aqua Salmon Farming Partners, and Stolt Sea Farms.

"Without this support, it is very likely the society would have had to close its doors," said society president Charley Vaughan.

"This is wonderful."

Vaughan said the donation — which he said will pay for about half of the operating costs for the salmonid program for the year — apparently sprang out of nowhere through local preacher Father Charles Brandt.

He said that an individual from one of the companies approached Brandt as a representative of ORES after a church service one day, and then went ahead and drew the other companies into the project.

Vaughan said he's reluctant to talk about the amount of money involved — which has already been presented to the society — because it might give people the impression that the organization's funding crisis is over.

But he said the aquaculture companies have made it clear that they're willing to work with the enhancement project and assist in a variety of ways in any difficulties it might encounter — including lending some of their own equipment and expertise.

"The six companies were more than happy to help out and maintain the activities of this important society and (its) hatchery," a representative of the fish-farming companies said in

a statement.

"Salmon farmers have always contended that they are a vital part of the community and that salmon farms complement, rather than compete with, wild salmon fisheries.

"This project simply provided an opportunity to demonstrate this."

ORES says the success of the society speaks for itself.

The organization has about 180 members and carries out an extensive range of interlocking fisheries enhancement projects on the Oyster.

Prior to 1983, Oyster River salmon stocks had all but disappeared.

"The historic runs of coho had fallen to approximately 1,000 from an average of 20,000, and the runs of pink salmon had fallen to about 400, from previous runs of 50,000," says project coordinator Joe Bye.

"In 1994, the runs of coho and pink salmon had rebuilt to 2,000 coho and 25,000 pink salmon, and in recent years the returns have even been as high as 4,000 coho and 100,000 pinks.

Chinook and chum salmon returns have also increased, and the society says that with healthy returns of spawning salmon and steelhead providing nutrients to the watershed from their carcasses, cutthroat trout and steelhead appear to be growing larger and increasing in numbers as well.

The society operates a hatchery and rearing channels to increase stock which in turn provides coho and chinook seed stock for repopulating newly accessed and restored habitat.

Society members also provide public education — there were more than 50 school tours of the facilities in 1994 alone — and also operate a nature park on the Oyster.

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