

For Immediate Release

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## **Conservation Society Reports on Health of Lower Fraser River White Sturgeon**

*The Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society (FRSCS) has released its annual white sturgeon stock status report for the lower Fraser River. This report (2009) indicates more mature fish, fewer juvenile fish, and slower growth rates in recent years. These results support a call to conserve and protect a diversity of aquatic habitats in the lower Fraser River, and to reduce impacts through increased public education and awareness.*

**Vancouver, BC** – The FRSCS reports that 2009 population estimate for white sturgeon (from 40-280 cm in length) was 43,600 for the lower Fraser River. This mean population estimate represents a further population decrease from the previous (2008) estimate, and a 25% decrease from the 2003 estimate. A comparison of the change in population estimates by size group suggests the population decrease since 2003 has been most pronounced for the juvenile component of the population under 100 cm fork length (5-15 years old).

These estimates also suggest that, since 2001, the abundance of sturgeon over 160 cm fork length (25+ years old) has increased and remained relatively stable since 2007.

FRSCS Chair Karl English, an expert in Pacific fisheries ecology and population dynamics, is confident that the information produced through the Society's program on trends in abundance and annual growth rates is both credible and reliable.

"White sturgeon are an apex species in the complex Fraser River ecosystem. They are interconnected with salmon, eulachon and many other species, and thus are a key indicator of ecosystem health for the lower Fraser River", English said.

"White sturgeon are also an important component of First Nations culture and recreational fishing along the lower Fraser River. The information obtained through FRSCS programs over the past 10 years tells us that sturgeon need our help, our conservation efforts, and more protection for critical spawning and rearing habitat."

FRSCS founding board member and Honorary Chair Rick Hansen expressed concerns.

"The FRSCS data has been reviewed by leading scientists in the Pacific Region and raised concerns regarding juvenile production and growth for all size categories. With the number of older fish increasing, but younger fish decreasing, we have to ask what is happening to these young fish and find ways to ensure their survival. Based on our information to date, recovery efforts need to be focused on education, the protection of critical habitat, increasing the food supply, reducing the illegal harvest of sturgeon and applying best practice fishing and handling techniques that reduce injury and mortality," Hansen said.



A comparison of average annual growth rates of specified size groups of white sturgeon indicates a clear decline in the annual growth rates for all size groups of white sturgeon after 2005. The timing of growth rate changes coincide with a stock decline of Pacific eulachon, a key prey item for lower Fraser River white sturgeon.

Launched in April 2000, the FRSCS monitoring and assessment program has relied greatly on the generous, in-kind efforts and contributions from stewards of the resource: professional angling guides, recreational, commercial, and Aboriginal fishermen, test fishery and enforcement personnel, the federal and provincial governments, post-secondary students, and various fishery monitors. Volunteers are FRSCS trained to sample and tag white sturgeon, and record and transfer data.

Other questions raised as a result of the core monitoring and assessment program include migration and residency within the Fraser River. To address those questions, the FRSCS initiated and implemented an acoustic telemetry study in the lower Fraser River in partnership with the Pacific Ocean Shelf Tracking (POST) Project and other partners including First Nations. As part of the project, in 2008 and 2009, 110 white sturgeon were tagged with a uniquely identifiable acoustic tag and released in the lower Fraser and Pitt rivers. Dedicated project receivers have been established in the lower Fraser River, with specific attention to the river entrances in the central estuary.

To date, all 110 sturgeon have been detected, and useful, novel information is being collected on their movements in and out of the Fraser estuary.

Founded in 1997, the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society is dedicated to the protection and restoration of the Fraser River white sturgeon. The FRSCS identifies and addresses issues that affect the sturgeon in the Fraser River watershed using critical data collected through its award-winning, volunteer-driven monitoring and assessment program. In addition, the FRSCS conducts public relations and communication initiatives and offers the HSBC Fraser River Sturgeon Education Program - a curriculum-based education program sponsored by HSBC Bank Canada, to promote community understanding of white sturgeon.

For more information about the FRSCS, this report, the HSBC Fraser River Sturgeon Education Program, community activities, and ways to donate, please visit [www.frasersturgeon.com](http://www.frasersturgeon.com).

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## Fast Facts

### 2009 Stock Assessment Report Highlights

- Lower Fraser River white sturgeon population estimate (2009): 43,628
- Population decrease of 25% from 2003 estimate
- Population decrease since previous (2008) estimate: 4.9%
- Overall population decrease largely due to a sharp decline in the number of juvenile sturgeon (less than 100 cm) since 2004
- Population increase since 2003 for mature adult sturgeon (over 160 cm)
- Annual growth rates remain at low levels for all size groups of sturgeon
- Areas of concern: habitat loss, damaging fishing practices, illegal harvesting of sturgeon

### Fraser River White Sturgeon

- Can live for over 150 years, and grow to 6 meters long;
- Have survived two ice-ages; are living in the Fraser River;
- Survive in both fresh and salt water;
- Have captured the imagination of hundreds of students and future 'sturgeon stewards', through the **HSBC Fraser River Sturgeon Education Program** grades 4-7;
- Rely on help from the recreational fishery, First Nations, government and community leaders, environmentalists, conservation experts and the public community.

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