

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**September 5, 2018**

**Sturgeon Conservation Group Calls for Immediate Protection of Key Spawning Areas and Juvenile Rearing Habitats for White Sturgeon in the Lower Fraser River**

**Vancouver, BC – Today** - Comprehensive analysis of 18 years of data collected by the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society (FRSCS) confirms that the abundance of juvenile sturgeon (age 7-12 years) has declined substantially over the past 12 years. The exact causes for this confirmed decline in juvenile sturgeon abundance are unknown but are likely the result of multiple factors including degraded spawning and rearing habitat, reduced food availability, sturgeon mortalities resulting from bycatch in salmon fisheries, and physiological stress associated with high levels of capture and handling events in net and recreational fisheries. The report provides 10 actions that should be implemented to reverse the declining trend for juvenile sturgeon. Increasing the production and survival of juvenile White Sturgeon are vital to the long-term sustainability of this ancient species.

In its recently released report "*Status of White Sturgeon in the Lower Fraser River in 2017*" ([www.frasersturgeon.com](http://www.frasersturgeon.com)) the FRSCS presents findings from its ongoing Lower Fraser River White Sturgeon Monitoring and Assessment Program. According to the report, the current rate at which juvenile sturgeon are recruiting into the population is below sustainable levels. Study results also show declines in abundance of age 13-22 sturgeon in recent years.

Founding – now Honorary – FRSCS Chair Rick Hansen emphasizes the concern and calls for action.

"Since 1997, we have identified a number of key issues affecting White Sturgeon survival and sustainability in the Fraser River. This includes the identification of several areas that are critical spawning or rearing habitat for White Sturgeon. Many of these key areas are currently under threat of destruction from proposed developments and gravel extraction applications," Hansen said.

Examples of key areas currently under review for development include the Herrling and Carey islands near Agassiz, and the Hatzic Eddy in Mission, all of which provide critical sturgeon habitat.

"We are calling for the protection of these areas for the future of White Sturgeon," Hansen said.

The FRSCS program uses two unique, yet complimentary, population models to monitor the abundance of White Sturgeon, and track trends, based on annual data collected by FRSCS volunteers. FRSCS volunteers apply "PIT tags" (much like the small microchips applied to domestic pets for individual identification) to thousands of sturgeon each year within the core assessment area (over 187 kilometres of the river's main stem, plus the lower Pitt River and Harrison River).

Thanks to the significant number of samples collected and tags applied, the FRSCS reports its findings with very high confidence levels.

"The 2017 abundance estimates for White Sturgeon in the lower Fraser River derived from our two independent models suggest that current abundance Age 7-12 sturgeon (juveniles) is well below historic levels, and has been declining since 2005," said Karl English, Chair, FRSCS. "Juvenile survival depends on usable habitat."

“An immediate 60% increase in the current levels of annual juvenile recruitment is required to stabilize abundance at 2017 levels,” English said. “If juvenile recruitment does not increase, our models forecast a continued decline in abundance into the foreseeable future.”

The report calls for all governments (First Nation, federal, provincial, and municipal) to take coordinated action to protect sturgeon spawning and rearing habitat, management of in-river net fisheries, and continued efforts to manage and limit the growth of the catch-and-release recreational fishery.

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

For the detailed report, visit [www.frasersturgeon.com](http://www.frasersturgeon.com) or call 778-322-7345.

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**Photo Credit:**

“FRSCS”

## Backgrounder

### Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society (FRSCS)

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

The FRSCS monitoring program uses a true “stewardship” approach to address objectives and generate field data. **By January 2018**, volunteers had conducted 149,257 sampling events (6,673 in 2017), tagged and released 68,375 sturgeon (1,648 in 2017), and documented 74,583 recapture events (4,938 in 2017) of tags applied by FRSCS volunteers within the core assessment area in the lower Fraser River.

### Population Assessment Models

In order to assess the data collected, the FRSCS uses two distinct population assessment models to track the current state of White Sturgeon abundances as well as to make credible projections of future trends, recovery potential, and long-term survival. The **Bayesian Model** analyzes a 24-month period of data collected while the **Integrated Spatial and Age Mark Recapture Model (ISAMR)** analyzes all available data collected to date.

The **Bayesian Model** provides a ‘snapshot’ of the current state of the abundance levels and allows for the assessment of short-term changes in the abundance of White Sturgeon in the lower Fraser River. (Fig.1). By analyzing the data based on **size class**, it is clear that there have been recent declines in the abundance of smaller size classes (Fig. 2).

Fig. 1

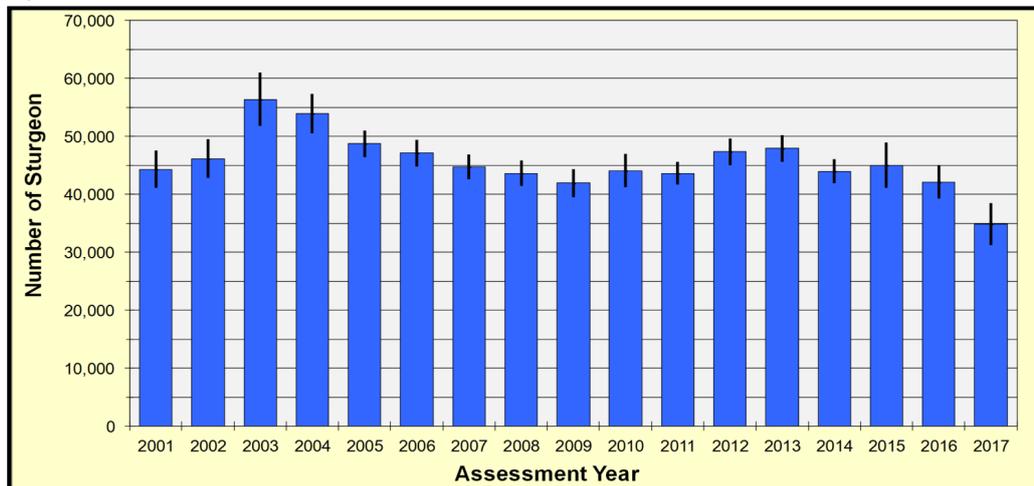
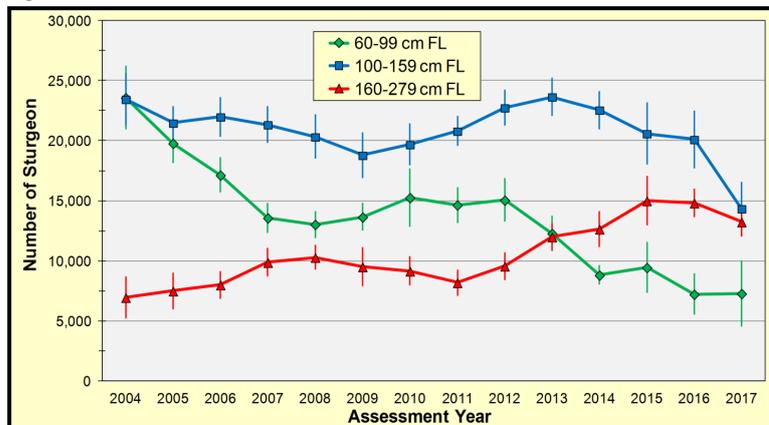
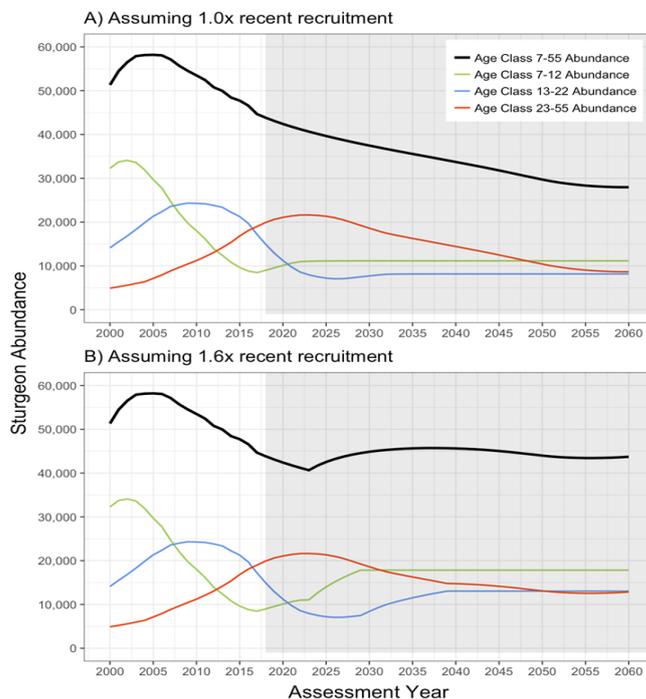


Fig. 2



The **ISAMR model** uses data collected over all program years (since 2000) and the observed age structure of sturgeon within the population to “reconstruct” historic abundance levels, by size group, and to predict future abundance levels (Fig. 3). Abundance forecasts generated by the ISAMR model indicate that given the current rate of juvenile recruitment (Fig. 3A), the number of White Sturgeon in the lower Fraser River will continue to decline into the foreseeable future, and that a 60 percent increase in recruitment is required to stabilize abundance at 2017 levels (Fig. 3B).

Fig.3



For more information, visit [www.frasersturgeon.com](http://www.frasersturgeon.com) or call 778-322-7345.