



# Detection of Hatchery White Sturgeon in Fraser River 'Inevitable'; Conservation Society Renews Calls to Suspend Release Program

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**Vancouver, BC** - A juvenile White Sturgeon that was cultured and raised in a fish hatchery on the Nechako River and recaptured in the lower Fraser River has the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society (FRSCS) calling for an immediate suspension of hatchery sturgeon releases in the Fraser River watershed. Over 41,000 cultured White Sturgeon have been released from the Nechako River sturgeon

hatchery since 2006 as part of a recovery initiative for the endangered population of sturgeon in the Nechako River.

“This is the first confirmed recapture of a White Sturgeon from the Nechako hatchery in the lower Fraser River,” said senior fisheries scientist Karl English, who works with the FRSCS on White Sturgeon assessments. “While it was inevitable, it is significant in that we can now confirm that White Sturgeon from the Nechako hatchery are fully disbursed within the Fraser watershed. This is not a desirable situation for a threatened population and a species that is already facing multiple challenges and threats to its long-term sustainability.”

Although the immediate and long-term risks of the integration of cultured sturgeon into the wild and declining population of White Sturgeon in the lower Fraser River are unknown, the FRSCS has previously signalled that provincial authorities have no choice but to take clear action to address the issue.

“What has been known since 2018 is that White Sturgeon released from the Nechako hatchery have been entering the Fraser River mainstem and surviving,” English said. “In 2019, over 80% of small juvenile sturgeon captured and sampled by provincial fisheries staff in the middle Fraser River near Williams Lake were of hatchery origin; their presence puts additional pressures on the low abundance of wild sturgeon in the Fraser River as they compete with hatchery fish for limited food resources and rearing habitat.”

The juvenile White Sturgeon recaptured in the lower Fraser River was originally cultured and raised at the Nechako White Sturgeon Conservation Centre fish hatchery, located near Vanderhoof. This fish was released into the Nechako River in May 2016, 116 kilometres upstream from the Fraser River confluence at Prince George, and recaptured five years later (June 2021) in the lower Fraser River five kilometres downstream of Yale and over 730 kilometres downstream from its release location on the Nechako River.

All cultured sturgeon released from the Nechako hatchery are tagged with an individually identifiable PIT (passive integrated transponder)

tag prior to release. The recaptured sturgeon from the Nechako hatchery was captured and sampled in the lower Fraser River as part of a juvenile White Sturgeon monitoring project funded by the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation (HCTF).

White Sturgeon are an ancient species that can live for over 100 years. They are also the largest (by length) freshwater fish in the world, with documented lengths to 6.1 meters. The species is known to spawn only in the Sacramento River (California), the Columbia River, and the Fraser River. The population in the lower Fraser River is the last wild (not cultured) population in the world.

## **Backgrounder**

### **Some of the many reasons for suspending the release of White Sturgeon from the Nechako hatchery:**

- Releasing more hatchery fish without understanding survival, distribution, and the carrying capacity of White Sturgeon in both the Nechako and the Fraser is wrong.
- For several years there have been multiple calls from First Nations, fisheries scientists, and NGOs, including the FRSCS, for a risk assessment pertaining to the Nechako sturgeon hatchery releases, plus calls for habitat carrying capacity estimates for White Sturgeon in the Nechako and Fraser Rivers, and for credible estimates of abundance of both hatchery and wild White Sturgeon in the Nechako and Fraser rivers. Those products have yet to be delivered.
- A risk assessment has been initiated by the Nechako White Sturgeon recovery initiative, however at the time of this press release the work has not been completed; until the risk assessment is completed and peer-reviewed, the FRSCS is calling for a suspension of additional releases of hatchery sturgeon into the Fraser watershed.
- While the recovery of White Sturgeon in the Nechako River is important, recovery actions that threaten the vulnerable wild population of White Sturgeon in the Fraser River should be suspended until a credible risk assessment is completed and the

conclusions considered.

- Although the Nechako White Sturgeon breeding plan states that hatchery fish that enter the Fraser should be removed, a plan has not been developed regarding removals.
- Provincial fisheries biologists in Region 5 (Williams Lake) have indicated that the two top threats to middle Fraser sturgeon are: 1) hatchery impacts (genetic, competition); and 2) food supply (food limiting in the middle Fraser, fluctuates with salmonid abundance). Hatchery fish will be competing with the low numbers of wild fish for limited habitat and food.
- Biologists working on Columbia River White Sturgeon recently discovered that they had been overstocking hatchery sturgeon for several years; it took more than ten years to find this out due to low catchability of juveniles. The overstocking includes overrepresentation of a few unique families within the same brood year, which is an additional concern.
- There have been confirmed captures of wild juveniles in the Nechako in recent years, which suggests natural spawning is occurring.
- The request by local (Nechako and upper Fraser) First Nations not to cull hatchery sturgeon after they reach a weight of ten grams should be acknowledged. However, based on the known straying of perhaps thousands of hatchery sturgeon to other First Nations territories on the mainstem Fraser, and now the lower Fraser River, consultation with other Fraser River First Nations and additional input regarding any further hatchery releases must also be considered.
- There has not been any meaningful discussion or consultation with First Nations authorities and communities on the Fraser mainstem, or stakeholders in the Fraser watershed, regarding: 1) the known straying of hatchery fish into the Fraser; 2) impacts of hatchery fish on the wild population; 3) hatchery stocking rationale and plans; and 4) contingency plans for Nechako hatchery strays (there is no plan).