

‘Trenching’ of Salmon River through farmland exposes it to degradation

Critical fish habitat designated a ‘key river’ by federal Fisheries

BY LARRY PYNN, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 8, 2014



From meandering stream to a straight ditch: A property owner in Abbotsford has channelized a stretch of the headwaters of the Salmon River, an important fish-bearing stream that flows to the Fraser River at Fort Langley. Photo by Larry Pynn/Vancouver Sun

ABBOTSFORD — A fully loaded logging truck parked outside the entrance to the Hogan Family Nature Park in Abbotsford is cause for curiosity — and concern.

The little-known city park — just five hectares, located on dead-end Debruyne Road west of Bradner Road — contains the headwaters of the Salmon River, a critical stream in the Fraser Valley that is home to coho and chinook salmon, steelhead, cutthroat trout and the endangered Salish sucker.

The park is an island of nature set in a rolling sea of farmland, a place where towering red cedars, firs and cottonwoods provide shade and refuge for fish seasonally and where maples, sword ferns, berries and shrubs act as filters in the rain to keep the water clear on its journey north and west to the Fraser River at Fort Langley.

Mike Pearson, a consulting biologist from Agassiz and a Salish sucker expert, leads the way along a

winding dirt trail that eventually leads to the park's western border and a stark, unsettling portrait of a gentle stream in a violent landscape.

All the forest on the private property has been logged and the merchantable timber hauled out by truck. Waste wood piles smoulder in the thin morning fog.

"Oh my God, I see where the trees came from," Pearson allows. "It's quite the contrast."

No longer natural, the stream has been diverted into a culvert beneath a mucky access road then funnelled down a channel cut out with heavy equipment. There are almost no natural riparian areas of shrubs or trees to buffer the stream from farming's effects, nothing to hold back the sediments certain to pour off the land during inclement weather.

"The Salmon River — basically trenched," Pearson confirms.

"It's very valuable fish habitat. All the damage from this logging and channelization will be carried downstream and impact there. The sediment will fill in spawning gravels ... cause a great deal of problems. It's polluting and degrading a public resource."

Section 35 of the federal Fisheries Act prohibits harmful alteration of fish habitat.

"Streams are connected and directional. What happens here will affect the habitat downstream. We're not two kilometres from Salish suckers and prime year-round fish habitat. It's polluting and degrading a public resource."

The Vancouver Sun's investigation of the case eventually leads to a dilapidated old farmhouse on the property. Inside the darkened living room sits 86-year-old Bob Douglas, watching TV with a newspaper crossword in his hand. When asked about the ditch, he says: "I'm responsible, I'm guilty, I'll go to jail."

Douglas said he ditched the winding Salmon River through his property around 1980 to stop beavers from building dams and to increase the amount of farmland. "I couldn't farm that part, so I got my neighbour to dig a ditch."

Over the decades, grasses grew in the ditch providing at least some stability to the slopes.

Then Douglas sold the 25-hectare property for, according to land-title documents, \$1.65 million to new owners who logged the property in preparation for blueberries.

"They took down all the trees," said Douglas, who continues to live on the property. "I was a bit upset about it."

The Sun found one of three owners of the property, Kulwant Singh Dhama, co-owner of Greenland Growers Nursery Ltd. on 272nd Street in Aldergrove.

Dhama said that both federal and provincial officials visited the property (in response to a complaint lodged by Pearson) and ordered a number of measures to offset the damage: installation of a large

culvert beneath an access road to accommodate a flood event, placing hay bales in the stream to help keep sediments from being washed into the water, contouring of the sides of the ditch to make it more natural, along with seeding and creation of a riparian area of plants on the banks.

Dhami said he simply wanted to deepen the stream for close to 50 metres to reduce flood risk. “We’re not trying to stop that river. It was more property managing. I know water has to go there. I’m not even thinking one per cent to develop this, because it’s nature. We can’t and we will not.”

Leri Davies, spokesperson for the federal Fisheries department, said the case is “under active investigation by fishery officers” and further comment would be inappropriate.

According to the Salmon River Enhancement Society, the 40-kilometre-long stream was designated a “key river” by federal Fisheries, used to keep track of Georgia Basin coho trends for over 25 years.

The Hogan family dedicated their park “to all children so that they can learn about nature.” Today it provides a stark lesson in fish protection.

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