

Bridge Coastal Restoration Program (BCRP): Watershed Plan Updates

Puntledge River
Public Input Session Minutes
March 14th 2008, Courtney BC

Morning Session

Introduction

As the facilitator for the day, Dan Ohlsson described the intent of the public session as an forum for local public members and First Nation's to review, and provide input on the fish and wildlife restoration priorities for the Puntledge River as suggested by BCRP's Agency partners, the Ministry of Environment and DFO.

It was also explained that this input is contributing to a larger initiative of updating BCRP's watershed plans to ensure they reflect the most current restoration needs to continue to address the ecological footprint created by the construction hydroelectric facilities.

Members of the BCRP's Planning Committee also explained that the Agency priorities being presented were gathered through the interview of regional staff. It was also mentioned that this session was a follow-up to a previous public input meeting held in 2006.

Facilities Overview

Stephen Watson presented a brief overview of BC Hydro's Puntledge River facilities and what major considerations are used to direct operations of these facilities (e.g. dam safety, general operations/maintenance, implementation of Water Use Plan monitoring studies). It was also mentioned that operation of BCH's facilities are tied to public health as the penstocks supply domestic water to the area.

Puntledge Watershed Plan Background

On behalf of BCRP's Planning Committee, Kevin Conlin summarized the purpose of BCRP's watershed plans as documents intended to guide the investment of BCRP's funds in applicable restoration activities. It was felt the original watershed plans had become somewhat outdated and could be improved by being more prescriptive in terms of identifying restoration activities.

In conjunction with regional Agency input, public sessions would help inform the updating process by including First Nations and community priorities.

BCRP Overview: Puntledge Watershed Investments to Date

Scott Allen, BCRP Program Manager provided a summary of projects completed to date in the Puntledge River watershed through BCRP. Highlights include:

- 23 fish projects, 0 wildlife projects had been completed and/or approved for the Puntledge watershed.
- From 1999-current, a total of \$1.44 million has been invested or allocated in the Puntledge through BCRP investments. This number represents 11% of the total BCRP investment to date in across all watersheds.

Agency Priorities: Fish (DFO)

Mel Sheng of DFO and member of BCRP's Vancouver Island Technical Review Committee, summarized DFO restoration priorities for the Puntledge River watershed. (see attached).

Agency Priorities: Fish (Ministry of Environment)

Mike McCullough of MoE and member of BCRP's Vancouver Island Technical Review Committee, summarized MoE restoration priorities for the Puntledge River watershed (see attached).

Agency Priorities: (Wildlife)

John Cooper, a public member of BCRP's Wildlife Technical Review Committee, summarized the restoration priorities as provided regional staff for the Ministry of Environment and the Canadian Wildlife Service (see attached).

Afternoon Session

Breakout Groups

During the afternoon session, two breakout groups were facilitated – one for fish and another for wildlife. The general direction provided to the groups was to first review and discuss the initial agency priority ratings and identified project areas. Then, participants were asked to indicate their level of support, to suggest any potential changes, and to provide supporting rationale for their comments.

The Fish Group

Limiting Factor - Seals

- Very strong support for the HIGH priority rating.
- Participants suggestions for projects and actions were organized into a four part strategy:
 1. Quantify the Problem
 - Survey numbers
 - Conduct a gut content analysis
 - Correlate with fish abundance
 - Conduct a seal habitat analysis
 - Develop a lighting strategy for the bridge area
 2. Implement a Predator Management Program
 - Develop a sterility program
 - Cull (look for a market?)
 - Implement deterrents (e.g., electric)
 - Use sea pens for fish
 - Flow trials during fish releases
 3. Assess Effectiveness
 4. Public Education / Media

Summer Chinook Salmon

- Very strong support for the HIGH priority rating.
- Suggested additions to the identified projects included:
 1. Assess out migration relative to the eicher screen – potential for operational changes? (HIGH)
 2. Assess the degree of poaching (especially in the river)
 3. Cold water supply for the hatchery
 4. Hatchery to enhance the earliest component of the run

Pink Salmon

- Strong support for allowing work in the Tsolum as a footprint issue.

Steelhead

- Very strong support for the HIGH priority rating.
- Very strong support for the projects to address access issues.
- Suggested additions to the identified projects included:
 1. Develop a joint strategic planning approach for steelhead
 2. Increase public education
- Two questions that were raised were:
 1. Should more gravel be considered?
 2. Should hatcheries be considered for steelhead?
- Finally, there was a long discussion regarding the catch-22 posed by allowing angling. On the one hand, anglers make great stewards; on the other hand any angling can be considered to cause harm, and may produce a certain degree of poaching.

Resident Trout

- Strong support for the HIGH priority on Cutthroat trout.
- It was pointed out that Rainbow Trout should also be considered.

Fish Passage

- Strong support for the HIGH priority rating.
- Suggested additions to the identified projects included:
 1. An assessment is required on the Browns River

Coho Salmon

- Some members felt the priority rating for Coho should be at least MEDIUM.
- No specific projects were identified by the group.

Morrison Creek Lamprey

- It was pointed out that any projects that are suggested for lamprey should be linked to the existing recovery strategy.

Finally, the issue of river rafting (and overall river use) vs. conservation requirements was raised and placed in the 'parking lot' as being outside the scope of the program.

The Wildlife Group

The wildlife break-out group did not comment on all priorities as identified by the Agencies, but focussed on the issues they felt were of highest priority. In addition, the group also provided several project ideas which they felt would help contribute to addressing individual Agencies priorities.

The general sense of the group was that because of a significant lack of specific habitat and species information, commenting on Agency priorities was challenging. This was partially reflected by the fact that no BCRP on Puntledge wildlife has occurred to date.

General

- The HIGHEST priority identified by the break-out group was not a specific issue as identified by the Agencies. The break-out group felt that, in general, the inventory and mapping of habitats (wetland, estuary, old-growth forest) with the intent to identify restoration opportunities.
- Major contributing factors to making this general activity a HIGH priority for the Puntledge is the (1) large knowledge gaps on wildlife issues in this watershed and, (2) a lack of any previous BCRP-funded wildlife project activity to date

Roosevelt elk

- Break-out group provided several project suggestions to address Roosevelt elk
- Cruickshank River population study and habitat suitability modelling
- Habitat restoration
- Land acquisition
- Riparian habitats

Species at-risk (SARA)

- Inventory

Wetland

- Wetland focussed work was identified as a HIGH priority
- Reclamation of areas and wetland creation adjacent to reservoirs (Comox Lake)
- Mapping

Estuary

- Estuary focussed work was identified as a HIGH priority
- Land acquisition
- Mapping
- Restoration (e.g. habitat complexing, shoreline reclamation)

Garry Oak

- Inventory opportunities

Old-growth forest

- Improve 2nd growth stands by accelerating development of old-growth attributes where silviculture treatments can be applied with long-term effect (e.g. mechanical modifications, fungal inoculation)

Riverine and SARA-listed bird species

- Inventory and habitat mapping
- ID restoration opportunities

Closing Remarks

After reviewing the results of the break-out groups, final comments were provided by members of the Planning Committee to describe next steps and how public input would be used in updating the watershed plans.

It was surmised that an immediate output from the day's session would be used to supplement BCRP's current watershed plans with the collected Agency and public input, and would be published as an addendum to the current Puntledge watershed plan and its objectives.

This information would also be part of a longer-term vision to determine the desired state of the Puntledge watershed (i.e. establishing a clear set of restoration targets, goals, and desired outcomes). The ideal watershed plan would also allow an assessment of progress towards this vision when reviewing the investments made to any given date.

It was felt that the day's session was a productive and respectful dialogue. The public feedback creates a better understanding of Agency priorities and current restoration strategies will produce the desired outcomes.