

Berry Farm Water Licenses Could Systematically Destroy Heritage Watershed

June 11, 2009 – Open Letter to the Provincial Minister of the Environment, the Federal Minister of Fisheries, and the Federal Minister of the Environment

The North Alouette River is a tributary of the South Alouette and a part of the BC Heritage River designation in the beautiful Alouette River Valley of Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows, BC. The river ecosystem supports many Blue and Red listed species of birds: green herons, blue herons, sand-hill cranes, peregrine falcons, etc. The fisheries values are some of the highest for the north side of the Fraser between Vancouver and Hope. A tremendous effort has been made by federal, provincial, Crown agencies, Katzie First Nation, the Alouette River Management Society (ARMS), and public volunteers to rebuild this watershed after years of abuse. With the advent of the flow increases incorporated in the Water Use Plan in 1996, we have seen spectacular results for our efforts. Chum runs have increased ten fold to over 300,000. Chinook were reintroduced in 1997 and pink salmon, once extinct in the Alouette Watershed, number over 20,000. Our Kokanee release experiment has been a fantastic success so far, as last year 54 sockeye returned for the first time in eighty years. BC Corrections have been an outstanding partner in shouldering the cost of supervision of inmate gangs to run our ALLCO Community hatchery. Tens of thousands of volunteer hours have been freely donated to make the rebuilding of these salmon runs a success.

As you would expect, after this herculean effort by the public and others, we have the expectation that our governments' would protect this increased fisheries values. After all, was it too much to expect an investigation and enforcement by DFO and MOE after the destruction of wildlife and fish habitat?

The lung of the North Alouette once had a very large wetland-fen surrounding Blaney Bog which incorporated important environmental and fisheries habitat. Sadly, Blaney Bog without the surrounding wetland is now significantly smaller and many of the tidal fisheries values have been drained and destroyed. This has been replaced by a vast network of cranberry and blueberry fields. In order to construct the cranberry and blueberry fields, the entire area was diked and drained, causing significant wetland reduction and flooding issues have ensued during high run-off periods.

Recently it came to our attention that the Golden Eagle Farms was digging in the North Alouette River (pictured at right). Upon investigation, we found out that they had obtained all their required permits from the DFO and MOE!



On May 25, 2009, Mr. Jack Emberly, a Maple Ridge resident, reported to Fisheries and Oceans Canada and ARMS, a thousand small or juvenile fish – stickleback, bass and cutthroat – were dying in the North Alouette River. Amanda Balcke, Executive Director of ARMS visited the North Alouette the very same afternoon and found a dozen dead juvenile fish further upstream adjacent to “sludge” dumped by the farm (pictured below). Mr. Emberly was passed around Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Environment Canada without a clear idea of who would investigate. On May 26, 2009, two Environment Canada staff investigated. Unfortunately, the day they visited the site, the water visibility was poor and they could not see the bottom of the river, where Mr. Emberly reported seeing most of the dead fish. It seems like they were not suitably equipped for a field investigation. They found two dead fish on the banks of the river but did not go beyond the bank of the River to investigate further. Subsequently many other dead fish were found by other members of the community, including Mr. Michael Sather, MLA for Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows. Both Mr. Emberly and ARMS would have liked to have tested the fish for cause of death, but this was impossible due to the costs of testing. This was reported in the Maple Ridge News on June 2, 2009.

On June 2, 2009, the Maple Ridge News also reported that Golden Eagle Farms had placed a large 33 centimeter pipe in the North Alouette River to irrigate their fields (pictured at right). Once again, we were told that the company has all the necessary permits from the DFO and the MOE for this work. This was apparent because the MOE Water Act can, or at least have, approved this river water outtake pipe without apparently considering fisheries values. However, the Federal Fisheries Act does take precedence, but only when enforced.



Will there be enforcement of the Water Act and the Fisheries Act from the ministries?

Naturally this brought up a number of public questions which a MOE Water Stewardship Branch Officer answered when the Geoff Clayton, President of ARMS, phoned the Surrey branch of MOE Water Stewardship some years ago and it appears nothing has changed:

Q: Is there a dry, seasonal, sliding scale in low river water conditions that would state on their license that X percentage of the flow could never be exceeded regardless of the cubic metres given out in the license for irrigation or harvest flood requirements?

A: **No.**

Q: Given the cubic metres contained in multiple water licenses I have seen issued on the North Alouette, they could almost dry up the river, is this not contrary to the Fisheries Act?

A: Yes, if they kill fish.

Q: Are there screens on the suction outtakes from the river?

A: **There is supposed to be.**

Q: Have you checked?

A: **We are too short staffed to check to see that the licenses are complied with.**

Q: You mean there are no spot checks to see if they take more water than their license requirements?

A: **No**

Q: Have you checked to see if there are any small fish being entrained in the suction pipe?

A: **No.**

Q: Has anyone checked to see if there are any fish in the ditches surrounding the berry farms?

A: **No.**

These answers are very disturbing to Mr. Clayton and not acceptable to him, ARMS and everyone else who cares about our Heritage Watershed. The snowmelt is almost gone from the mountains and the river level has nearly reached summer low conditions. Furthermore, there is tidal action to be considered and drafting out at low tide creates additional stress on fish. The river is staging chinook, coho and steelhead smolts as this letter is being written. DFO's Chilliwack hatchery released 200,000 chinook last week and ALLCO Hatchery will release an additional 150,000 chinook shortly. These chinook may not immediately leave, but course up and down the North and South Alouette Rivers for some time.

There is a long history within the MOE Water Stewardship Branch issuing multiple licenses in a watershed without staff capacity to monitor the overall accumulative affect. The North Alouette is a classic case in point, with eleven licenses approved and thirteen pending water license applications for berry farms. Does the Water Stewardship branch even know how much water is in this system month-to-month or in a dry year? This slipshod method has been apparent in the Water Licensing Division since its inception. The policing of the licenses only comes about by complains of water shortages, or as in this case, a fish kill. Remember this is the same government division that allowed massive power companies to operate outside of their license in the last century.

There is a disgraceful lack of enforcement given the legislation in place to protect rivers. Clearly there is a disconnect within the Ministry of the Environment and no enforcement by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans even in the face of a fish kill.

The community will not stand for this incompetency and has set up a new website (www.savethealouette.ca) to let the public know about these issues. Each concerned citizen knows the issues are larger than the just North Alouette River and if this can happen in the Lower Mainland on a heritage river system, what else is occurring in British Columbia?

We demand a full investigation and action on all fronts regarding these licenses that have been issued. The various government agencies and departments must be taken to task for their irresponsible attitudes, as well as their Ministers, our politicians who represent the public interest in this matter of vital concern for our environment.

Sincerely

Name

Organization if Applicable

City/Town