Pre-Season Backgrounder on the 2009 Fraser Sockeye Season

With the 2009 fishing season fast approaching, one can assume that the usual misinformation perpetrated by both the media and public officials will occur. It is the purpose of this backgrounder to lay out some of the basic facts before the season starts, so that the Area E Gillnet community can strive to set the record straight.

- The main component of this year's cycle of Fraser Sockeye is the famous Horsefly/Quesnel run.

- The Horsesfly run was almost entirely obliterated by the placement of a dam on the Quesnel River back in the late nineteenth century.

- However, in the 1930's the International Pacific Salmon Fisheries Commission (I.P.S.F.C.) began planting eggs in the system, and henceforth the run was miraculously rebuilt.

1993

- In 1993, a spectacular return of 24,195,000 Fraser sockeye stands as testimony to the good management practices –particularly of the IPFSC—in earlier times. It is also worth noting that the Horsefly run was rebuilt in an era when the commercial fishing fleet was twice its present size—which should lay to rest the shop-worn rhetoric of the environmentalists that commercial fisheries are incompatible with sound conservation practices.

- In 1993, the gross escapement was 7,249,000—the largest since 1909.

- The 1993 commercial catch in the Fraser River and Gulf of Georgia net and troll fisheries, alone, was 2,767,000 sockeye.

- Although the gross escapement was 7,249,000, the net escapement—thanks in part to increased fishing by the in-river Native-fishery—was 6,402,000. The discrepancy of 847,000 "missing" spawners in 1993 was the largest on record to that point in time. The officially reported catch in the separate Native-only fishery was 1,033,000. But there was evidence of massive illegal fishing as well.

- Sadly, ever since—thanks to DFO management policies--- the Horsefly run has declined precipitously over the past three cycles.

- The favourite explanation for this decline, by DFO, environmentalists, and the media, is that commercial over fishing is to blame. Nothing could be further from the truth.

1997

- In 1997 the total return of Fraser Sockeye was 16,414,000. This was 1,816,000 less than forecast, but still the 3rd largest return on this cycle since 1913.

- The gross escapement was 5,804,000, which was the 2nd largest since 1913.

- However, the net escapement had a negative discrepancy of 728,000 so called "missing" fish.

- The officially reported catch in the separate Native-only fishery was 1,033,000.

- The total Canadian commercial catch was 8,435,000.

- On August 11, 1997, 150 non-Native fish harvesters conducted a protest fishery during a Native-only commercial fishery. Member of Parliament John Cummins was jailed for two nights for being part of the protest.

2001

- In 2001, DFO erroneously predicted a return of 12,548,000 Fraser sockeye.

- Despite a very good escapement in 1997, the actual return in 2001 was only 7,191,000.

- This poor return reflected a return ration of only 1.61 fish per adult spawner in the cycle year of 1997. By comparison the return ration in 1993 had been 7.45.

- One can only assume that unusually large escapements, combined with intensified in-river fisheries, conspired to drive the return ratio downwards. On the other hand, DFO's official explanation—without conclusive proof-- is that warm water in the river is the main problem.

- As a result of DFO's swing to radical weak stock management all possibility of commercial harvest was cancelled in 2001. The Area E catch of Fraser sockeye was only 44,000—all taken in the test fishery.

- Meanwhile, the catch in the separate Native-only fishery was 629,000.

- The total escapement in 2001 was 5,256,000—which was 575,000 more than the adjusted escapement goal! In other words, DFO deprived the commercial fishing sector of any possible catch in order to put as many spawners up the river as possible—some would argue to offset the increased amount of poaching in the

river. This fact was never acknowledged by either the media or the environmentalists.

2005

- In 2005, the DFO predicted a return of 12,548,000, based on the good escapement in 2001. Indeed, the escapement in 2001 was 24 percent higher than the 1997 escapement, and more than double the historic average for the cycle, so it was logical to expect a good return.

- However, despite this the actual return in 2005 was only 6,746,993 Fraser River sockeye. This represented an abysmal return ration of 0.80—which contrasts sharply with the 1946-1997 average for the cycle which was 5.53.

- Once again in 2005, as part of "risk averse" management DFO chose to drastically curtail commercial harvests, although the separate Native-only fishery operated more or less as normal.

- The gross escapement in 2005 was 5,043,569, or 74 percent of the run.

- The net escapement was only 3,307,950 or 49 percent of the total run. While this net escapement was well above historic average it was a management fiasco, in that DFO had so unfairly restricted the all citizens commercial fishery—allegedly to protect "endangered " late-run sockeye-- while at the same time failing to clamp down on illegal in-river fisheries.

- The discrepancy between the gross and net escapement in 2005 was a staggering 1,735,619, or 25.7 percent of the run. While DFO again blamed warm water conditions, there was no evidence—in the form of dead carcasses—to support that claim. There was ample evidence of some stocks arriving on the spawning grounds with net marks.

- The total Canadian Commercial catch in 2005 was only 129,379, or 1.9 percent. This should once again put paid on the environmentalist clap –trap about commercial over fishing.

- Meanwhile, the catch in the separate Native-only fishery was 956,238 Fraser sockeye. The Native –only catch represented 83 percent of the entire Canadian harvest which should put to rest the perennial poppy-cock that Natives are discriminated against in the fishery.

- In September 2005, after it was clear that DFO had under-estimated the 2005 return, and it had been proven that there was little or no pre-spawn mortality in the late-run sockeye component, about 50 Area E fish harvesters participated in a protest/food fishery. The protesters caught an estimated 3,375 sockeye, or about .01 percent of the run. In response, several were charged by DFO and had to

appear in court. Not surprisingly, no penalties were handed down by the Court. Meanwhile, DFO failed completely to do anything about the massive poaching upstream, preferring instead to make a scapegoat of the Area E fishing community.

Conclusions:

Three things are happening simultaneously in the Fraser River sockeye fishery at present:

1) Harvests by the public commercial sector have plummeted ,without fairness or justification, from historic levels—while the Native-only fishery operates virtually without restraint ;
2) Gross escapements (past Mission) have increased exponentially—far above historic averages;
3) The productivity of Fraser sockeye runs (i.e. return ration per adult spawner) has declined drastically.

All three phenomena are the outcome of DFO policies –in place ever since the highly politicized Anderson Plan of 1998— designed to depress the commercial sector and facilitate the transfer of fish to the separate Native-only commercial fishery.

There is no moral, legal, or biological justification for what the DFO is doing. It is nothing more than politics of a most repugnant kind, wherein the state uses its police powers to bestow favours upon a select and favoured group.

It does not help that rhetoric about "conserving" stocks through "risk averse" management (i.e. reduced commercial fisheries) is depressing some Fraser sockeye stocks by flooding the grounds with unusually high numbers of spawners.

The real reason this is happening is not to conserve the stocks but rather to offset the quantum leap in in-river fishing—which the DFO is afraid to do anything about.

The number one priority for the Area E community, in so far as dealing with the media this year, will be to point out the above facts, and to focus the spot light on the real threat to the resource.

Neither does it help that DFO has carefully manipulated the commercial sector into a divisive and wrong-headed debate about transferable quotas being the panacea for the current malaise.

The real answer lies not in concentrating property rights into the hands of fewer and fewer participants, but rather in restoring the balance between sustainable escapements and harvests, as well as to crack down on illegal fishing.

Appendix

Figure 1

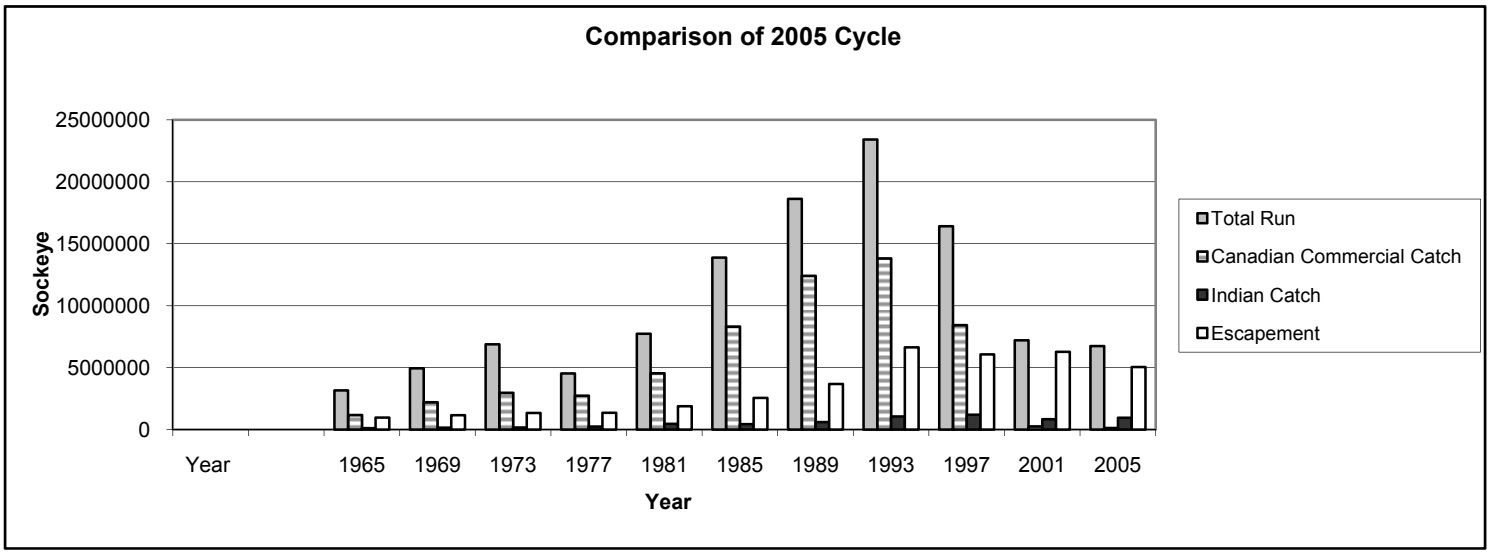
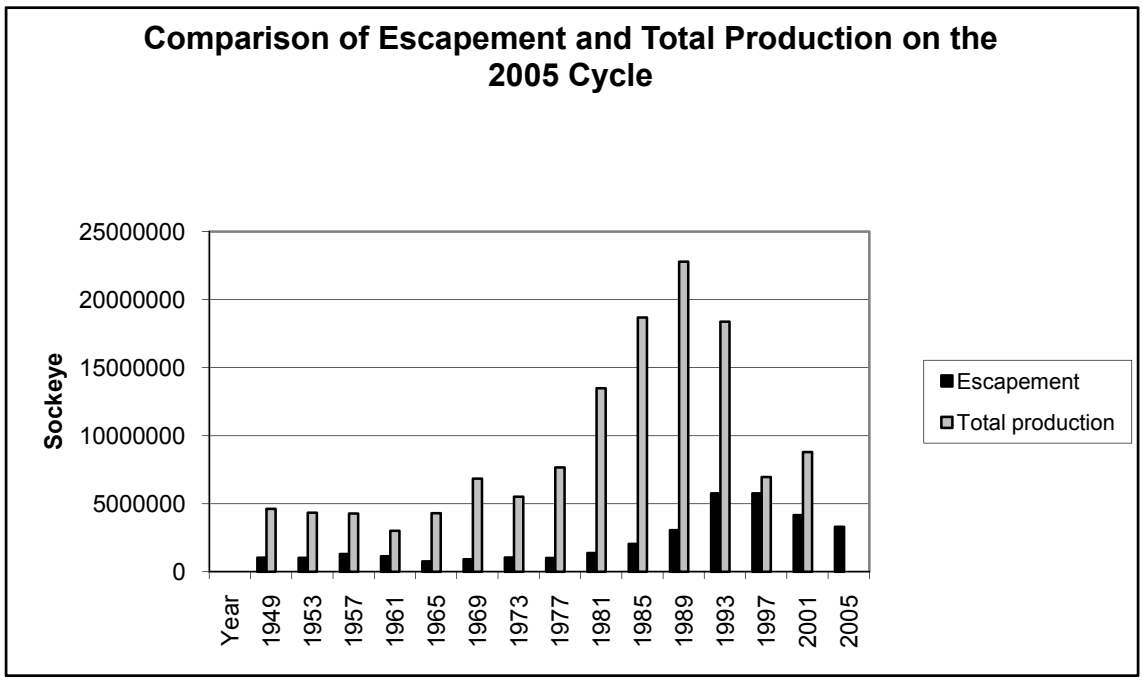
Figure 2