



Sunshine Coast  
Conservation  
Association

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## **Fisheries Sensitive Watershed Designation: A Rationale**

June 8, 2015

***Fisheries Sensitive Watershed (FSW)***: This term refers to a designation created by the *Forest and Ranges Practices Act (2006)*. Its presence in the *Act* (FRPA) clearly shows that British Columbia recognizes the need for additional measures to ensure that major salmon producing systems are adequately managed and conserved. Although the *Act* is now 11 years old, none of the major fish-bearing watersheds in the Sunshine Coast Forest District have been designated as *Fisheries Sensitive Watersheds*. As a consequence, enormously productive watersheds that have supported human societies for at least 10,000 years and provided much of the wealth that we see around us today, are only accorded the minimal environmental protections afforded to small fish-bearing and non-fish bearing watersheds.

There are significant reasons for decision-makers to apply the FSW designation to the region's major fish-bearing watersheds. These reasons include formal recognition of:

The fishery as the most important resource value in the designated watershed;

The history, extending over many millennia, of the fisheries' contribution to human habitation and society;

The significant potential for fully functioning and restored watersheds to provide enormous societal benefits through its fishery;

The need for all resource management and development agencies both government and private to address and be accountable for maintaining and restoring the ecological function and productivity of the designated watersheds;

The requirement that registered professionals and/or anyone authorized in law to undertake an action in the designated watershed must ensure that their activities are consistent with maintaining and restoring the fishery;

The need to ensure that the mistakes of the past (e.g., excessive concentrations of logging, riparian logging, etc.) are not repeated in the future, and;

The urgent need for First Nations, government agencies and non-government environmental organizations to work together to conserve, and where necessary, restore fisheries values in the designated watersheds.



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***Fisheries in decline:*** A review of salmon returns and escapement figures in our nominated watersheds going back to 1947 is unequivocal; a radical decline has occurred. The scale of decline appears to be approximately 80% over 60 years in most of the large watersheds. Many other runs have entirely disappeared. Our review also looked at stocks in numerous small creeks and the pattern is, for the most part, the same. While our review focused on salmon species, it should be noted that there is also documentation of significant conservation concern about the disappearance of Steelhead Trout populations and the severe decline in anadromous Cutthroat Trout populations. In addition to ecological impact, these declines have also had an enormous economic impact on the greater Sunshine Coast region. A summary of spawning returns and events in each proposed watershed is included in each FSW nomination package.

***Causes of fisheries decline:*** Concentration of clear-cut logging, overfishing, hydroelectric dams, spawning habitat destruction, resource road building practices, destabilized nutrient and hydrological regimes, mining practices, urban development and pollution are frequently cited as contributing to fisheries decline. More recently, concerns have also been raised about fish farm diseases and competition for wild salmon food sources, impacts of independent power projects and the effects of climate change. Of these causes, the FSW designation could, among various other benefits, directly address the issue of concentration of logging within each watershed.

***Legacy of voluntary regulation:*** Prior to introduction of the *Forest Practices Code of British Columbia Act* in 1995, compliance with the *Fish/Forestry Guidelines* was voluntary and almost universally ignored. In our major fish-bearing watersheds we are now facing the legacy of the failure to protect unstable lands and stream-side forests. Road building, road deactivation and stream-crossing practices prior to 1994 were also wholly inadequate and are still not entirely satisfactory today.

***Forest Practices Code of BC Act (1995):*** The introduction of the Forest Practices Code was successful in bringing about some major reforms in forest management. Among the most impressive outcomes were changes in road building and stream crossing standards, guidelines for assessing terrain stability and mandatory riparian forest protections. A number of major new programs were also brought forward that supported fisheries-positive environmental change: Forest Renewal BC, Watershed Restoration Program, the Identified Wildlife Management Strategy, and the Riparian Areas Regulation for private land and Landscape Unit Planning for coarse-filter biodiversity protection.

Guidebooks defining best practices for a variety of environmental and social values were



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produced at that time. Terrain stability assessment standards were initiated. Notably, government brought in updated requirements for *Coastal Watershed Assessment Processes (CWAP)*. Unfortunately, mandatory limits to the amount of land that could be in an “equivalent to clear-cut” condition in any given fish-bearing watershed were never established in the Forest Practice Code or subsequently in FRPA’s *Forest Planning and Practices Regulation (FPPR)*. However, the CWAP Guidebook defines *significant watershed sensitivity* to be a watershed where there has been a sufficiently high rate of cut (at least **20%** of the watershed's area has been logged in the past **25 years**) and hydrological problems are already evident or anticipated by officials.

***Forest and Range Practices Act 2006 (FRPA)***: This new *Act* transformed the *Code* into a results-based professional reliance system. Government’s environmental goals and objectives are described in the *Act’s FPPR*. Licensees describe how they will achieve these goals and objectives in a *Forest Stewardship Plan (FSP)*. If a watershed is designated as a *Fisheries Sensitive Watershed*, licensees must describe in their FSP how fisheries values are to be adequately managed and conserved. If a fish-bearing watershed is not designated as a FSW, there are no mandatory special management requirements for major fish-bearing watersheds.

One of the most important requirements in a designated FSW is the undertaking of a Coastal Watershed Assessment Process. The purpose of the CWAP is to ensure that the pace of logging disturbance does not compromise the ecological capacity of the watershed to support fisheries values. In looking at the forest age class maps attached to each FSW nomination it is readily apparent that there has been concentrated logging over a relatively short period of time, in most of the major fish bearing watersheds. We believe that this has disrupted watershed functioning and contributed to significant declines in fish populations.

As conservationists, we believe FSW designation is valuable in establishing that fisheries are critical to the welfare of human society and that appropriate conservation and management of major fish-bearing watersheds is urgently needed. We also note that changes in mean seasonal temperatures and rainfall patterns associated with climate change have been documented in many watersheds. These changes equate with flow regimes that are increasingly more violent. In our opinion, the circumstance of a changing climate is yet another indication that special management considerations are appropriate for the region’s major salmon bearing watersheds.

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