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Auditor-General needs to act or future dire for salmon

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Some people look at the Fraser and see the most productive salmon river in the world, a remarkably beautiful and rich watershed that provides perfect habitat for everything from giant spawning chinook to tiny pink fry.

Others see a gravel mine. They look at those glistening expanses of aggregate, exposed during low water, and see a natural conveyor belt delivering broken rock to a city that's pouring concrete like water during a construction boom.

Unfortunately for the salmon, British Columbia politicians have embraced the vision of the miners, approving the removal of 500,000 cubic metres of aggregate a year from the riverbed.

Studies led by Dr. Michael Church, a professor emeritus in the University of B.C.'s geography department, have shown that only 200,000 to 300,000 cubic metres of new gravel comes down the river each year. That means the lower Fraser River's bed is slowly being eaten up by Vancouver's construction industry which, among other things, is building venues for the 2010 Olympics, the so-called green Games.

People who know and care about fish in the Fraser - with the remarkable exception of the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans - are alarmed, fearing gravel mining will seriously degrade salmon habitat.

Of particular concern is an operation at Spring Bar, near Agassiz, where the Seabird Island Indian band is removing 400,000 cubic metres of gravel from one site.

In a recent petition to the Auditor-General of Canada, several groups operating as the Fraser River Ad Hoc Stewardship Gravel Removal Committee asked for an investigation.

The committee, which includes the B.C. Wildlife Federation, the Fraser Valley Salmon Society, the Sportfishing Defence Alliance and others, maintains that the DFO failed to properly assess the impact of the operation before approving it.

When the mine was proposed, several prominent individuals in B.C., including David Suzuki, founder of the David Suzuki Foundation; Mark Angelo, a leading rivers advocate; **Daniel Pauly**, an internationally renowned fisheries scientist; and Vicky Husband, one of the leading voices for conservation on the West Coast, filed a similar petition with the Auditor-General.

That petition warned that the "proposed large-scale removals of gravel will disrupt the river ecosystem and negatively

affect fish and fish habitat."

When Dr. Marvin Rosenau, a former fisheries biologist with the provincial Ministry of Environment, learned of the Spring Bar project, which is the largest single removal of gravel from any stream in Western Canada, he described it as "grotesque."

Despite the concerns of such weighty critics, the DFO has not done a thorough analysis of the impact of gravel mining on the Fraser's ecosystem.

Auditor-General Sheila Fraser might well ask why.

The DFO's job is to protect salmon, not worry about flood threats, the concerns of local politicians, or profit margins in the construction industry.

Unfortunately Ms. Fraser doesn't have the authority to investigate the provincial government as well. That will have to be left to the public who, in an election year, might well start asking Liberal candidates whether they support gravel mining in a treasured salmon river.

B.C. government officials say the project is needed to reduce the flood threat.

But Dr. Church and his colleagues at UBC have concluded that mining the riverbed does not alleviate the flood threat. It just shifts the flow.

Dr. Church has warned that no more than 285,000 cubic metres of gravel a year should be removed from the Fraser, or serious environmental damage could be done. The B.C. government has authorized about twice that amount.

Where you mine, how you mine and how much you mine are all important issues that should be studied carefully before a gravel bar is dug up and put into dump trucks.

On the Fraser, however, such issues are not being adequately addressed.

The gravel-removal committee was right to ask Auditor-General Sheila Fraser to get her boots dirty in the river, to find out why.

For the sake of the salmon, let's hope she responds soon.

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