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Suzuki, others, ask auditor general to investigate gravel mining on Fraser River

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VANCOUVER -- The auditor general of Canada has been asked to investigate a gravel-mining operation on the Fraser River that was approved this year by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans despite concerns it would destroy salmon habitat.

A petition filed by several British Columbia organizations and prominent individuals to auditor general Sheila Fraser says removal of 400,000 cubic metres of gravel from Spring Bar, near Agassiz, "will disrupt the river ecosystem and negatively affect fish and fish habitat."

The petitioners include David Suzuki, the internationally known writer, broadcaster and founder of the David Suzuki Foundation; **Daniel Pauly**, a fisheries scientist at the University of B.C.; Mark Angelo, a conservationist, teacher, writer and chairman of the B.C. Heritage Rivers Program; and Vicky Husband, one of the province's leading environmental advocates.

The B.C. Wildlife Federation, Fraser Valley Angling Guides Association and the Sportfishing Defence Alliance are among the groups that endorsed the petition, which asks for a review of the Fisheries Act authorizations that allowed the mine to proceed in February.

The operation is supported by the B.C. government, which provided \$564,000 from the provincial flood mitigation budget to build a temporary access bridge to Spring Bar.

The mine is being operated by the Seabird Island Indian Band, which is selling the highly valued gravel to the construction industry for an undisclosed amount.

The petition alleges that, contrary to statements by DFO and provincial officials, the removal of gravel will not reduce the flood threat on the Fraser and will cause extensive damage to salmon habitat.

"We believe that the DFO has been deliberately obstructionist in regards to the transparency of its decisions . . . and has failed to meet the intent of Canadian fisheries and environmental law in respect to Fraser River gravel removal," Frank Kwak, acting chairman of the Fraser River Ad Hoc Stewardship Gravel Removal Committee, said in a letter to Ms. Fraser that accompanied the petition.

Kwak said salmon stocks have fallen to dangerously low levels on the West Coast, and one reason is the failure of

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government to protect fish habitat.

He said that ``DFO's outright refusal to meet the intent of its statutory obligations . . . is a key example as to why there is little chance for salmon in Canada to survive into the next century in any meaningful way."

When the mine was approved, officials said the project would be carried out ``in a way that minimizes the potential harm to fish habitat and fish stocks in the river."

But the petitioners say that has not been done and that ``over time (the mine) will partially or completely dewater a major pink salmon spawning habitat (the right channel at Spring Bar) equivalent to the capacity for several hundred thousand reproducing fish."

The letter to auditor general Fraser states that DFO has approved ``unmitigated and uncompensated destruction of fish habitat via large-scale gravel removal from the lower Fraser River for reasons that are largely unsubstantiated (i.e., the removal of this gravel largely does not provide significant benefits to flood protection or erosion)."

Although the Fraser routinely approaches flood conditions, digging down the river bed by removing gravel bars may not alleviate that threat, said Michael Church, a professor emeritus in the department of geography at UBC, because the river's flow can simply shift.

Church has done research that shows about 200,000 to 300,000 cubic metres of gravel washes into the lower river each year. The Spring Bar operation is removing more gravel from one place in a river than has yet been done in Western Canada.

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