

Lower Fraser River Fishery Access Points Field Trip Report

July 19, 2011

The following is a report of a Joint First Nation-Sport Fishing Working Group field trip to view access potentials and problems on the north side of the Fraser River from Aggasiz to Hope, BC.

Attendees: Clem Seymour, Art Andrews, Jim Harris, Marion Robinson, Frank Kwak, Roy Field, Shane John, Romeo John, Robert Reyerse, Leigh McCracken, Dave Barrett. **Photo's:** Leigh McCracken and Dave Moore (July 19, August 26 and 31).

Overview - Highway #1 and #7 Corridors

Popular salmon fishing access points on the lower Fraser between Mission and Hope create concentrations of anglers at several unorganized access points on Highway #1 and Highway #7 corridors where highway and river banks converge. The greatest concentrations of vehicles at angler access points were observed on Highway #1 paralleling the south shore of the Fraser River (Hope/Canyon turn-off west of Hope, Hunter Creek, Jones Creek, and Laidlaw), and on Highway #7 paralleling the north shore of the Fraser River (Highway #1 Fraser River Crossing at Hope, Weigh scales, and 5 additional points between Chawathil and Seabird Island).

First site visit: Seabird Island First Nation

Chief Clem Seymour welcomed us to their community and we were joined by Councillors Jim Harris and Art Andrews. We reviewed the history of events associated with the public's use of Seabird's land to access the river. The problems associated with this use are varied and dangerous. They include,

Parking along Highway #7 (Haig Highway). This is perhaps the most dangerous element of this fishery. People park along this busy 2-lane highway which has a speed limit of 80 Km/hr, is heavily used by transport trucks and is a popular alternate route to Vancouver. As a result, angler parking creates much foot traffic across the Highway (anglers with much gear, families, kids, dogs etc.) unloading their gear, crossing the highway, parking inappropriately all mixed with vehicle traffic in a hurry.



Figure 1: Highway #7 - parking Seabird Island

Crossing the train tracks is a necessary and dangerous part of this fishery. This area includes multiple sidings and as a result sections of trains, sometimes whole trains, can be parked along this stretch of river front. Confronted with this, people climb under the trains to access the river. This activity is very dangerous due to not knowing if the train you are under is about to start moving, and because once the stationary train has been crossed you can step out into the main line and be faced with a rapidly moving train and be stuck between the moving train and the stationary train.



Figure 2: Angler trail - Train track crossing at Seabird Island

A general lack of facilities from toilets, to garbage disposal leads to a very messy site that the Band Council is forced to deal with as they manage these sites for their own membership. In addition people tend to camp for days at a time without permission. All this activity tends to alienate the Seabird community from their land and access to the river to undertake their traditional fisheries. Once on the river the harassment can include people casting lead sinkers at passing drift fishermen as well as gear conflicts between drift nets and cast fishing.

A very fruitful discussion was held at the Seabird Island Band office regarding all these challenges and what might be done about them. The Band, in conjunction with the Department of Highways, and with the support of the RCMP, was able to get “No Parking” signs installed along the highway but the effectiveness and regulation is challenging. In addition they installed locked gates and posted “No Trespassing” signs to try and prevent unauthorised use of their private lands. This too has proved challenging to enforce, and anglers simply have found alternate paths of access across these lands.

An unanticipated outcome of these actions by the Band has been the inadvertent exclusion of Band members to these same lands. With the addition of gates a community member is required to get a key or get someone from the Band administration to open the gates for access. It also has added a layer of

complexity with regard to safety. Any emergency vehicles would need to gain access to these lands and this has now become more complex.

A general discussion about the wisdom and potential of creating a Band enterprise to control access as well as profit from it was carried out. The first use of any earnings from such an enterprise would be directed at paying the salaries of the required employees needed to run such a site. The main impediment of such a scheme involves crossing of the train tracks. This will involve much consultation with the train companies and some innovative thinking to solve. However the potential for such an enterprise looks very promising.

With this in mind we then toured the lands in question. At this time of the year (July 19) the river was very high and the amount of land between the highway and the river was considerably less than when the fishery occurs. Nonetheless we were surprised at the amount of land in question and were convinced the potential to start up a camping, day parking, service industry was striking. However caution needs to be exercised as to how to develop such an opportunity and not end up excluding Seabird members from their land. Conversely, strategically sited public access developed by the Band could potentially protect sensitive Band lands and redirect non-member traffic to controlled areas.

It was agreed that further discussions were in order between the Working Group and the Seabird leadership to determine if these potentials were worth developing and if so how might we go about it. The Working Groups promised to follow up on this thread in the Fall. In Figure 3, the high water at Seabird Island retreats to the island that is dark green against the high bank of the south side of the Fraser.



Figure 3: High Water at Seabird Island

Second site visit: Chawathil First Nation

Shane John and Romeo John welcomed us to their community and we were able to discuss the issues faced by the Chawathil FN. They are faced with most of the same issue as Seabird Island as to parking on the highway, crossing the train tracks and waste and garbage spread about.

Once again the river was very high and much of the popular fishing bar was inundated and inaccessible as can be seen in Figure 4.



Figure 4: High water at the Chawathil FN river front lands

The low water mark would be approximately half way between the two shores in the picture in Figure 5 and shows the significant amount of land available for potential development.



Figure 5: High Water at Chawathil FN.

As was the case at Seabird Island the amount of land between the highway and the river, even at high water, is quite extensive and only lightly developed for access.

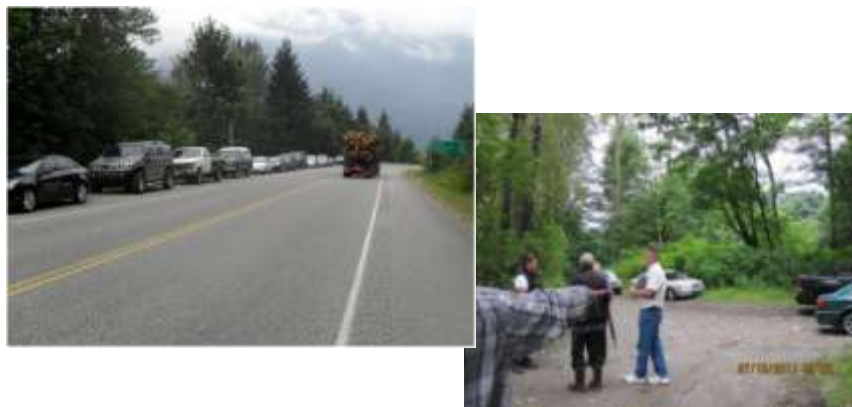


Figure 6: Chawathil Lands showing access road and off highway parking

The discussion we had touched on the need to develop an integrated plan that deals with the current problems without alienating Chawathil members from their land. It was apparent that developing controlled access could likely attract even more people and increase the demand for waste and security management. Once again any for profit enterprise would need to support the labour needed to run the enterprise. In that the challenges and potentials were much the same as for Seabird Island, it was agreed that the Working Group should include Chawathil in the discussions on how and when we might proceed. A round of Fall meetings would be the best time to start for the 2012 fishing season, and to consider long-term plans.

While these first meetings about access to the north side of the river included Seabird Island and Chawathil First Nations, further discussion is required with the Ruby Creek First Nation that lies between these two nations on this stretch of the river and Cheam First Nation directly across the river as they could be affected by or have interests in any development plans. Invitations to meet with these First Nations would be in order to ensure they are at least aware of our activities and to ensure that any problem solving actions we might undertake do not merely move the problems to their lands.

It is also noteworthy that the next adjacent downstream First Nation (below Cheam) is Scowlitz who currently operate a campground in Harrison Bay. Meetings with other First Nations on the adjacent south shore of the Fraser have not occurred but will be similarly important.

Third Visit: Hope boat launch ramp.



Several years ago the Fraser River Angling Guides Association contributed to the improvements to this launch ramp. Their efforts were supported by the RCMP and DFO in that it also provides access to the river for emergency vehicles and boats. However it has also proven to be a magnet for people more interested in camping and partying as opposed to accessing the river for angling and boating. This has given rise to conflicts with adjacent land owners.

Figure 7: Boat launch ramp at Hope, BC

The adjacent land owner bears the brunt of this behaviour and is keen to explore ideas to deal with it while still providing access to the river for emergency personal as well as legitimate anglers. As can be seen in Figure 7 his fence line parallels the access ramp. As well Figure 8 shows the corner of his fence line but his property line actually crosses the access road. As a result he could extend his fence and cut off access altogether.



Figure 8: Corner Fence of adjacent land owner to the Hope, BC boat ramp.

To be clear this is not his first choice but his level of frustration is serious and mounting. One option is to install a gate that he and his neighbours would manage, opening it first thing in the morning and closing it at dusk, thus preventing overnight camping. Keys to the gate would be provided to all emergency personal.

While the land owner was unfortunately unable to meet with us on site, we promised to include him in any additional work the Working Group might consider. The first order of business would be to determine existing property lines, the City of Hope's status related to these lands and the upland boundary of the high water mark of the river. Again this work will be taken up in the Fall.

Figure 9 shows the Highway #1 parking for hike-in anglers during sockeye season immediately downstream and west of Hope.



Figure 9. Highway 1 parking – Just west of Hope

Summary

Access limitations to the river environments between Mission and Hope are causing conflicts between residents and visitors and creating safety concerns on both Highway #1 and #7 on the north and south sides of the Fraser River. Though the challenges are most apparent during peak salmon fishing periods, this is not just an angling phenomenon as sites are popular for picnickers, hikers and campers. Problems associated with angler access to the north side of the Fraser River from Agassiz to Hope are most extensive and, in light of highway and railroad crossings it is often most hazardous. On the south side of the Fraser River this is most apparent between Hope and Popkum and also includes dangerous uncontrolled highway and railroad crossings.

Conflicts over trespass on Indian Reserve and Private lands most prevalent on the north side of the river are a growing phenomenon, and are also a source of tension among and between competing interests in the local salmon fishery.

The lack of infrastructure such as boat launches, bathrooms and camping throughout this reach of Fraser River represents both an added pressure on unorganized access points and lost economic opportunities. This initial trip gained first-hand experience with the problems and their potential resolution. It has been pointed out that the opportunities for access control may coincidentally provide a tool for public access management and for First Nations to benefit from the popularity of river access and the growing angler use.

The next step will be to fully document the existing access points, their relation to popular fishing sites and identification of access strategies that will improve safety, reduce conflict, and provide economic opportunity.

It is hoped that a framework plan could be completed before the 2012 fishing season. However, it is likely that a more comprehensive resolution to the needs could be more further off.



Figure 9: the view across the Fraser at the Hope, BC launch site.