

Fish Habitat Lost to Shoddy Roads

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It's appalling that the government gets failing grades for its failure in managing what could be "the single most important habitat impact affecting fish." For all the talk about threatened salmon stocks and the need to protect critical environment, the government is allowing streams and rivers critical to migrating fish to be blocked by roads, the province's Forest Practices Board has reported.

The board investigated 1,100 road crossings in 19 watersheds and found that only 42 per cent were designed and built in a way that allow fish to pass through. Even in streams considered "important or critical" fish habitat, more than one in four road crossings blocked fish movement.

In the Campbell-Memekay watershed north of Campbell River, the board found that almost one-third of road crossings of important or critical streams blocked fish migration. The potential damage to fish stocks is enormous. There are some 370,000 resource road crossings on the province's streams and rivers, mainly forest roads. Residential and tourism development and agriculture create additional road crossings; the report found those tended to be in critical habitat areas. A single crossing can block fish access to kilometres of rivers and streams -- or whole watersheds.

The board has no axe to grind. It is government-appointed, set up to report on the effectiveness of the forest management regime in the province. The report is grim. And it is difficult to understand why these problems continue long after the critical role habitat destruction has played in the loss of salmon and other fish stocks. The public has been assured that the damage was done in the bad old days and that things have changed for the better. That's simply not true. The measures needed to allow fish to thrive aren't complicated or expensive.

A major problem is the use of round culverts, sometimes above stream level at the outlet end. The flow is fast -- particularly if the pitch is steep -- and the unobstructed bottom makes fish passage difficult. Fixing the problems can be as simple as using an oval culvert embedded in the stream course, so natural materials collect on the bottom, or an open-bottomed system.

B.C. has regulations that are supposed to ensure fish passage. The Forest Planning and Practices Regulations, for example, require that forest activity, including roads, not have a "material adverse effect on fish passage" and bar actions likely "to harm fish or destroy, damage or harmfully alter fish habitat."

But the regulations aren't enforced. The board reviewed more than four years of cases handled under the forest regulations and found only three decisions relating to stream protection at road crossings. The report found various enforcement agencies haven't even agreed on how damage will be assessed.

Salmon, steelhead and other fish stocks are in trouble from a variety of reasons. Some, like warming oceans, are beyond our control. That makes it all the more critical that basic measures to protect fish habitat from avoidable damage are not only in place, but vigorously enforced.