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Upper Columbia White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative (UCWSRI) Reaches a Milestone

CASTLEGAR – For more than a century, the upper Columbia white sturgeon has been swimming against the current of change. Now through the collaborative efforts of a coalition of transboundary stakeholders, an upper Columbia White Sturgeon Recovery Plan has been produced and adopted by consensus.

“The recovery plan identifies short, medium and long-term objectives to prevent the disappearance of sturgeon in the Columbia Basin and establishes a stable age structure in the population over the next 50 years,” says BC Hydro’s manager of Environment and Sustainability Hugh Smith.

The UCWSRI began in 2000, when a review of stock status indicated a problem with survival of young fish. This led to a Letter of Understanding being signed between Fisheries and Oceans Canada, BC Environment (now the Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection), BC Fisheries and BC Hydro to formalize their common commitment to a White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative. The agreement was the first step towards the stabilization and stock recovery of white sturgeon in the upper Columbia River.

“The UCWSRI now consists of over 25 stakeholders including Canadian and BC governments, U.S. federal and state governments, industry, First Nations, public and tribal agency stakeholders working together to prevent the extinction of white sturgeon in the upper Columbia River,” says Smith. “It is hoped that the Columbia River white sturgeon can make a full recovery of the population through a combination of water management, habitat restoration and hatchery conservation and supplementation to ensure their long term survival.”

White sturgeon are North America’s largest and longest-lived freshwater fish. This ancient species has survived 175 million years, including ice ages, volcanic eruptions, flooding and mass extinction. The causes of the white sturgeon’s decline are not fully understood, however, in the last 125 years, human development, construction of hydro electric dams, changes in flow patterns, loss of habitat and harvesting in the Columbia River has led to its decline and “critically imperiled” population status. While spawning has been recorded, young sturgeon are seldom found, indicating these fish are not reproducing successfully. Most recent estimates put the upper Columbia population, between Hugh Keenleyside Dam and the U.S. border, at approximately 1,400 sturgeon.

In 2002, about 9,000 finger sized sturgeon were released into the Columbia River downstream of the Hugh Keenleyside Dam (near Castlegar), and near the U.S. border. In the fall of 2002, the UCWSRI began exploring ways to monitor these fish after release. “Tests of a variety of methods showed that underwater video was effective in finding the young fish, scuba

diving and closely monitored gill nets showed merit capturing them for study purposes,” said BC Hydro’s Kootenay Generation Area’s Environmental and Social Issues manager, Gary Birch.

Some 30 to 40 yearling white sturgeon were sampled during 2002 and showed satisfying growth rates. “By sampling the population and learning more about their growth patterns and habitat requirements, we will have a better understanding on how these prehistoric fish can survive for future generations,” says Birch. “However, the challenge remains to recover diminishing populations and prevent their extinction.”

BC Hydro is committed to the consideration of social and environmental implications of the operation of its dam, including dams constructed under the international Columbia River Treaty. Where avoidance of impacts is not possible, BC Hydro is working with regulatory agencies and other stakeholders on recovery planning processes. In recognition of its efforts and commitment, BC Hydro was awarded the 2001 Minister’s Environmental Award for their involvement in the UCWSRI.

To find out more about the UCWSRI or how you can help, please view the web site at www.uppercolumbiasturgeon.org or call 1-888-358-3474 (FISH).