

Assessment of Forest and Range Planning and Practices to Conserve Fish Habitat in British Columbia

Background

Forest and range practices have the potential to impact the quality and function of fish habitat at the site level and, [cumulatively](#), at the watershed level. British Columbia's *Forest and Range Practices Act* (FRPA) sets planning and practice requirements that, if implemented effectively, are intended to achieve government's objectives for fish habitat. FRPA also has tools to designate watersheds where special management is required to address significant watershed sensitivity and fish values.

Despite these requirements under FRPA, Forest Practices Board audits and investigations have reported issues in or around fish habitat. In response to these findings and concerns from the public and First Nations, the Board decided to initiate a two-part investigation of how well fish habitat is conserved under FRPA.

Part One, which is to be published in 2018, is a special report that evaluates the BC government's approach for the conservation of fish habitat under FRPA. In the special report, the Board documents a number of factors that could increase risks to the effective conservation of fish habitat. Most notably, is that FRPA's requirements for the protection of fish habitat are aimed mostly at the site-level (e.g., riparian retention, fish passage etc.). However, the prevailing view among specialists is that fish habitat is being largely impacted by the cumulative effect of activities at the watershed level. Also, with few exceptions, government does not specifically monitor the effectiveness of forest and range practices to conserve fish habitat at either the site or watershed level.

Purpose and Scope of Part Two

The purpose of part two is to evaluate:

1. licensees' compliance with FRPA's requirements to protect fish habitat; and,
2. whether, and to what extent, planning and practices by forest and range licensees are contributing to the protection of fish habitat at both the site and watershed levels in sample watersheds known to have significant fish values.

The focus of the investigation will be forest and range activities from 2009 (after full FRPA implementation) to 2018, although observations may be made about the effects of historic activities and other land uses on the current condition of fish habitat. The investigation will not assess the management of fish populations through actions such as stock enhancement or activities related to commercial, recreational or sustenance fisheries.

Approach

The investigation will use a case study approach to examine about five watersheds with significant fish values from throughout BC, with and without watershed level designations

under FRPA. Each sample watershed¹ will be selected to demonstrate a different management scenario and approach to the conservation of fish habitats, such as where there has salvage harvesting to address forest health or multiple licensees operating in a watershed.

The investigation will use office-based analysis to create base data for field evaluations. Board investigators will do the following:

Office-based analysis:

- Review licensee plans and assessments to evaluate the overall approach to conserving fish habitats in each watershed.
- Describe each sample watershed in terms of its physical characteristics (topography, climate, soil characteristics, vegetation, channel structure and history of development).
- Interview government staff, forest and range licensees, qualified professionals and others to seek understanding of on-the-ground practices and to collect information to support fieldwork.

Field evaluations:

- In each sample watershed, assess licensee activities with the potential to affect fish habitat and general compliance with FRPA requirements.
- Note best practices being applied by licensees to address site- and watershed-specific issues related to fish habitat.
- Evaluate the overall condition of fish habitats in each sample watershed. If fish habitat are impacted, attempt to link this back to the suspected causal factor(s).

Reporting

The Board will report the findings of this special investigation to the public and may make recommendations to improve planning and practices for forestry and range under FRPA to conserve fish habitat.

¹ For the purposes of this special investigation, the Board is defining a “watershed” as a basin between 5 000 and 50 000 hectares in area.