

Salmon Emergency in the Somenos Watershed

(a letter recently sent to North Cowichan council and copied to our partners, friends, media and local governments).

Dear North Cowichan Mayor and Council,

The Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society is declaring a Salmon emergency in the Somenos watershed. We are concerned that, if actions are not taken immediately to improve conditions for salmon in the Somenos watershed, salmon will no longer be found in the Somenos system within a few years. We are asking North Cowichan council to seriously consider the crisis at hand when making future land use decisions in the Somenos Watershed and to consider additional funding for efforts to resolve the Parrots Feather issue in Somenos Creek.

The Somenos watershed as a prime salmon rearing habitat is coming to an end and the stories of walking on the backs of fish may soon drift further into folklore. The end of the salmon may only be a few years off as confirmed by salmon expert Dave Preikshot, the new Environmental Manager in North Cowichan, at the most recent Somenos Management Committee meeting.

It is a well-known fact that salmon are an important economic contributor to British Columbia and it is well-documented that migrating salmon contribute to the overall health of an ecosystem. The loss of the salmon to the Somenos watershed would be culturally and economically devastating as well as contributing to the failure of the watershed's ability to benefit the health of the Cowichan watershed.

The significant cause of this impending disaster is the water quality issues in Somenos Lake and its tributaries, streams that continue to transport pollution and chemicals unabated from the Somenos drainage area to the Cowichan Estuary. The other significant impacts on salmon habitat are in-stream invasive aquatic plants and the ongoing loss and shrinkage of streamside habitat bordering these same salmon-bearing creeks.

Somenos Creek is a salmon highway to the upper watersheds of the Somenos system. Bings/Menzies (or as some might know it as Holmes Creek), Averill and Richards Creeks drain the slopes of Mt Prevost and Mt Richards allowing salmon to lay their eggs deep into the watershed. As a well-known fisheries biologist (Brian Tutty) quoted many years ago 'Somenos is the breadbasket of the Cowichan' referencing the salmon nursery capability of the Somenos watershed.

Bings & Menzies Creeks begin on the slopes of Mt Prevost close to the boundaries of the lands owned by Vancouver Island Motorsport Circuit (VIMC). Menzies Creek flows through the heart of the VIMC proposed expansion area before it joins Bings Creek which borders the VIMC expansion property. We have great concerns re any additional land clearing impacts on water retention and transportation on the slopes of Mt Prevost.

Richards Creek flows from Crofton Lake into Somenos Lake draining agricultural lands that add many nutrients to an already nutrient-rich lake. Past dredging activities have had a lasting impact on the potential salmon production but we believe a small population of Coho still make it far into the watershed to reproduce and die. It is not unusual to find adult salmon carcasses left behind in Somenos Marsh when annual flood levels drop.

Somenos Lake, a place where the Cowichan ancestors had many villages, was once thriving with fish and was a place to swim and enjoy. The Lake is now close to a cesspool status in summer with water temperatures climbing to 30 degrees C (salmon cannot survive in waters above 24 degrees C). Toxic algae blooms are frequent in the lake and the now low-flowing creeks provide very little fresh water to recharge to system. The lack of flow also contributes to the growth of the Parrots Feather in Somenos Creek.

The Somenos watershed narrows to under 50 feet wide at the Tzouhalem Road bridge over Somenos Creek. At this point there exists an invasive species called Parrots Feather. It is a pond and aquarium plant that was recently available at Canadian Tire and other stores. Five years ago, this plant did not exist in Somenos Creek. Now it almost fills

the length of the creek from Somenos Lake to the Cowichan River. Parrots Feather has the ability to block fish passage due to lower water quality, higher temperatures and mass of plants blocking their way.

A recent example of an impact on the Somenos watershed was last May's accidental pond failure at Duncan Paving which caused a wall of water to speed down Bings Creek raising the temperature of the creek and creating a lot of turbidity in the water, both of which can be lethal to young salmon. The report that followed was pretty damning. The biologist (Preikshot) who created this report informed me that any children playing in the creek at the time could have easily been drowned. This release was not a small release and illustrates the ongoing pressures that all the salmon creeks in the Somenos system are facing. In addition to this were the heavy metals (source unknown) that were found during water quality measurements in Bings Creek last summer.

These issues are red flag indicators of a watershed in trouble.

The SMWS are thankful to the Municipality of North Cowichan for financially supporting our efforts to limit the growth of Parrots Feather in Somenos Creek but more needs to be done. In particular, efforts underway to challenge water quality issues in Quamichan Lake should be applied to Somenos Lake at the same time instead of after Quamichan Lake studies are completed.

In addition, Watershed Greenway Corridors must be taken into consideration for all properties that have a watercourse on or beside their properties. The current practice of Qualified Environmental Professionals shrinking riparian corridors without considering the watershed's needs first must be changed and municipalities need to entrench adequate riparian corridors on their lands and make them untouchable.

We do not have years anymore, not for salmon for sure. The failure of the salmon, a keystone species in the ecological chain, would be cause for many other failures down the chain. We cannot let this happen and we urge the Municipality of North Cowichan, as well as other local

governments, as you all contribute to the quality of the Somenos watershed to take immediate action now.

Sincerely

Paul Fletcher

President, Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society