

Wild Atlantic salmon classified as endangered

By Kelly Brooks
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Times are tough for wild Atlantic salmon throughout Nova Scotia, including those in Queens County's Medway River. However, things may slowly start to change after a recent report that may place the salmon on the endangered species list.

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) has assessed 16 wild Atlantic salmon population segments. Five were classified as endangered, one as threatened, four as of special concern, one as extinct, four as not at risk, and one as data deficient.

The Southern Uplands salmon population, which includes the Medway River, has been listed as endangered. This segment includes salmon in rivers from northeastern mainland Nova Scotia, along the Atlantic coast, and into the Bay of Fundy as far as Cape Split.

Due to the long timeline process that needs to take place in order to have a species put on the endangered list, president of the Medway River Salmon Association Darrell Tingley, says it will take time before anything changes.

"What changes here is the government in dealing with this situation," says Tingley. "Once there's a status recommendation of endangered or threatened, they then have to come up with a management plan to do something

about the listing, and therefore come up with money and a plan to make things better in the situation."

The government has nine months to respond to the assessment, so Tingley says any work would not start until at least late 2011 or early 2012.

"Within that nine months there will be public consultations with the various salmon associations throughout the province," says Tingley. "We will put forth recommendations how we see that they can work with us to bring the salmon population back to greater numbers on the Medway River."

In the meantime, Tingley says the association has been doing a number of things to help the salmon population. A major project involves putting limestone into the river, to reduce the effects of acid rain.

"We have been advocating a number of things to DFO over the past couple of years, and the first thing for us was acid mitigation," says Tingley. "The river is acid impacted, as well as most of the rivers in the Southern Uplands. They can build on that by helping us financially on the liming."

Sue Scott, vice president of communications for the Atlantic Salmon Federation, says, "Acid rain is the primary cause of death. The salmon become so acidified that they die."

Although acidic habitats seem to be the leading cause of endangering the species, she says low marine survival is

also a problem. Low marine survival is common to all salmon populations, but they seem to be dying in the early stages of their migration.

In the past, she says dams preventing their spawning migrations, flooded spawning and rearing habitats, and pollution and logging reducing freshwater habitats have also impacted the salmon.

On the Medway River, Tingley says the upper 30 per cent vacant of salmon, due to a broken fish ladder by the Harmony power dam blocking any access.

"What we're trying to do is get that fish ladder repaired, or a new fish ladder installed so salmon can access that area," says Tingley. "That's one of the things that's important for the future, to use 100 per cent of the spawning habitat versus just 70 per cent."

Despite the situation, there is a glimmer of hope for these struggling fish. A lime doser installed Halifax's West River-Sheet Harbour in 2005 is successfully reducing acid levels.

The technology distributes powdered limestone into rivers damaged by acid rain and neutralizes the acid in the water.

"Liming is the thing that is going to be the most effective," says Scott. "Things are certainly improving. There are more juvenile salmon now."

Although this is a good sign for salmon in part of the Southern Uplands segment, Scott says the equipment is only being used in one river out of about

60 in the province.

Unfortunately, Scott says both the initial installment and the annual cost of operating the equipment is a significant amount of money.

"We're really encouraging the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to take some responsibility here in restoring these populations," she says.

Tingley says in dealing with DFO on major issues, the answer usually seems to be lack of funds. However, he says if the salmon are put on the endangered species list, this answer could change.

"This would mean that government money has to be put into it and they have to find solutions to the problems," says Tingley. "We would anticipate that there should be money forthcoming from the government into the pocket of DFO, and therefore a plan would be developed with the Nova Scotia Salmon Association, with ourselves, and with other salmon groups, to make things better in a population basis."

Tingley says the association knew something like this was coming. Although they did not know what the recommendation would be, they figured it would be designating the salmon as endangered.

"Now at least they have to come up with a plan and there's timelines, whereby before they were not obligated to do anything," says Tingley. "Hopefully it will make the future much brighter for salmon down this part of Nova Scotia."