

Steelhead Sport Fishing Regulations Proposals Vancouver Island Region for April 1, 2007

Sport fishing regulations governing steelhead fishing have changed many times over the past 30 years. Generally the regulations have become more restrictive as circumstances of the day have demanded. The quality and quantity of steelhead habitat in many of our most accessible and popular streams has diminished due to issues such as logging, urban development and competing water uses. Co-incidentally there have been major shifts in ocean productivity, especially over the past decade. The combination of a reduced ability of many streams to produce seaward migrating steelhead smolts and an ocean environment where their survival is at record lows does not create happy circumstances for those who cherish steelhead angling. Compounding the difficulties faced by steelhead and steelhead managers is the steadily increasing efficiency of anglers, not the least of which is related to more guides and more boats on all the larger producers. Increased angler efficiency maintains catch and catch rates and obscures the fact there are fewer fish.

The steelhead sport fishing scenario is not all gloom and doom however. Our knowledge of steelhead behaviour and the rivers they occupy is now sufficiently advanced to allow for some adjustments to sustain angling opportunity where closures are presently in effect. The principles and environmental factors on which some of the regulations changes proposed below are based are as follows:

1. Steelhead migrate through the lower reaches of most Vancouver Island streams relatively quickly. Rapid movement through these areas means any negative impacts from exposure to angling can be managed to minimize conservation concerns.
2. Important pre-spawning holding reaches and spawning areas occur in all steelhead streams. These are reasonably well known in many streams and almost always occur in the middle or upper reaches of the streams and/or in their tributaries. Lake outlet areas are particularly valuable in this respect.
3. Catch and release angling with single barbless hooks, bait bans and artificial lures is a proven conservation tool and highly unlikely to cause measurable biological harm to steelhead or steelhead stocks that are not exposed to sustained angling pressure and multiple capture events.
4. Winter high water conditions and cold water temperatures are such that potential angling impacts on actively migrating winter steelhead are low due to low catch success.

Collectively these principles and factors can be applied to select times and places to provide angling opportunities presently unavailable. Proposed stream-specific regulation adjustments are outlined below. Please note that unless stated otherwise single barbless hook, bait ban/artificial lure and wild steelhead release regulations would apply.

The Ministry encourages anglers to provide their comments on these proposals.

Chemainus River

It is proposed to open the lower Chemainus River from the Highway 1A Bridge (Chemainus Road) upstream to the Bannon Creek confluence from Dec 1 – June 30.

Cluxewe River

It is proposed to extend the open to fishing area from the present boundary signs at the Port McNeill landfill site upstream for about 5 km to the Island Timberlands Mainline Bridge crossing. The open season would be Dec 1 – May 31.

Cowichan River

The Cowichan River presents a special case where the number and complexity of regulations warrant review based on current information and trends. Habitat conditions in the lower river continue to be degraded by clay and silt contributed by bank erosion and slope failures upstream. Salmon and steelhead spawning success is significantly reduced by sediments directly attributable to these causes. This places increasing importance on the best remaining habitats in the upper third of the river. Concurrently, unprecedented angling effort is occurring there. Boating angler numbers and guiding effort are at all time highs throughout the system but especially in the more productive upper reaches. The Cowichan (see also Gold River below) is the only major steelhead stream in the province where there is no temporal or spatial angling closure to protect spawning fish. The Ministry believes that this lack of protection will result in further declines in wild steelhead abundance.

Ministry efforts to address habitat conditions related to excessive siltation are ongoing. To reduce the impacts on wild steelhead and to protect longer term angling opportunities for steelhead and other species throughout the Cowichan system a series of angling restrictions are necessary. The proposals include:

1. An angling closure from the weir at Lake Cowichan downstream to the mile 70.2 trestle December 1 through April 15 inclusive.
2. Fly fishing only from the mile 70.2 trestle downstream to the fishing boundary signs at Skutz Falls all year.
3. Fly fishing only from the Greendale trestle near Lake Cowichan downstream to the mile 70.2 trestle from April 16 through November 30 inclusive.
4. Catch and release for all wild trout and char for all reaches of the river that are open to angling.
5. Bait ban in all reaches of the river all year.

Other regulations such as the motor size restriction, speed restriction and site specific angling closures (e.g. White Bridge area Sept 1 – Dec 15 and mile 66 to Mayo Lake tributary confluence Oct 10 – Dec 15) would remain in effect.

Englishman River

It is proposed to open the lower Englishman River downstream from the “Top Bridge” at the end of Allsbrook Road from December 1 – May 31 inclusive.

Gold River

The Gold River presents another special case where conservation measures are warranted. Snorkel survey observations and catch records in recent years demonstrate a marked downward trend in winter steelhead abundance. Not unlike the Cowichan the Gold does not have temporal or spatial closures that are effective for winter steelhead. Summer steelhead are protected because they are primarily distributed in the upper Gold and Heber rivers in areas that are closed to angling either seasonally or permanently. The large majority of the Gold River’s winter steelhead spawn downstream from the Muchalat River confluence and are therefore exposed to angling for their entire freshwater residence. Increasing use of boats, especially in areas between the Muchalat confluence and the Gold River townsite that were seldom fished and afforded safe haven for maturing fish, has placed additional pressure on the stock that remains. To address current stock status and reverse recent trends in abundance it is proposed to close the Gold River upstream from the Heber River confluence from December 1 through May 31 annually.

Haslam Creek (Nanaimo River tributary)

This important spawning stream for Nanaimo River steelhead has remained open to angling while the Nanaimo has been closed. It is proposed to close Haslam Creek to angling.

Little Qualicum River

It is proposed to rescind the April 1 – November 30 angling closure from the falls in Little Qualicum Falls Provincial Park downstream to Kincade Creek.

Nanaimo River

The current experimental fishery that opened the Nanaimo River from the Cedar Road Bridge upstream to the Island Highway Bridge crossing from February 1 – May 31, 2006 is proposed to be extended from December 1 – May 31.

Oyster River

The current experimental fishery that opened the Oyster River downstream from the Little Oyster River confluence from February 1 – June 30, 2006 is proposed to be extended to the period December 1 – June 30.

Puntledge River

It is proposed that the Puntledge River be open to angling from the base of Stotan Falls downstream to the Lower Puntledge River Hatchery fence and from the boundary signs located approximately 100 m downstream of that fence to tidewater, except for the area 100 m upstream and downstream from the Morrison Creek confluence (closed all year).

Quatse River

Increased access to hatchery steelhead is an objective for this hatchery supported fishery. It is therefore proposed to extend the open area by approximately one kilometre from the present angling closure boundary at the Dick Booth Creek confluence to a new boundary at the Quatse River fishway.

Quinsam River

It is proposed to open the Quinsam River downstream from the fishing boundary signs located 300 m below the Quinsam River Hatchery fence from December 1 – April 30.

Stamp River

A dominant feature of the Stamp/Somass sport fishery is the extensive use of jet boats and drift boats. The Ministry has been besieged with complaints about the differential application of motor restrictions and the competitive advantage afforded licensed angling guides. The application of a court ruling which exempted licensed angling guides from the horsepower restriction which formerly prevailed is the origin of the problem. Those anglers who do not qualify for the motor size exemption or don't have boats complain bitterly about being squeezed into fewer and fewer areas and forced to contend with boats fishing mid-stream in some preferred locations.

The only tools available to deal with fishing from boats under federal fisheries legislation is "no fishing from a boat" or "no fishing from a power boat." Motor size and speed restrictions and powerboat prohibitions are under the jurisdiction of Transport Canada and outside any direct Provincial fisheries influence. Given the Ministry's objective of restoring a level of fairness among all parties with an interest in angling the Stamp/Somass system it is proposed to eliminate angling from boats in the popular bank access area from the fishing boundary signs at Stamp Falls Park downstream to "Girl Guide Falls". To increase access to and promote the harvest of surplus hatchery fish it is also proposed to remove the bait fishing prohibition presently in place between Stamp Falls and "Girl Guide Falls".

We would like to hear from you

Please submit comments by August 11th, either via e-mail or regular mail, to one of the following addresses:

E-mail: fishreg.review@gov.bc.ca

Regular mail: Fisheries Regulations Review
Vancouver Island Region
Ministry of Environment
2080-A Labieux Road
Nanaimo, B.C. V9T 6J9

A summary of input received and the final outcome of each proposal will be posted on this web site following the August 11th deadline.