

Morice Watershed-based Fish Sustainability Plan – Stage II

The Morice WFSP – Planning Linkages and Forest Licensee Support

March 31, 2004

**Prepared by Greg Tamblyn, M.R.M
Environmental Program Coordinator
Community Futures Development Corporation of Nadina**



**Prepared for Biodiversity Branch
Environmental Stewardship Division
Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection
and
Pacific Region
Fisheries and Oceans Canada**

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Morice Watershed-based Fish Sustainability Planning (WFSP) process grew out of a community-based watershed planning process for the Bulkley River watershed. While some WFSPs are formally led by government agencies, the Bulkley-Morice process benefited from external leadership from stakeholder and stewardship groups. In July 2001, Community Futures Development Corporation of Nadina (Nadina) embraced Watershed-based Fish Sustainability Planning in order to complete strategic watershed planning begun by the Bulkley-Morice Salmonid Preservation Group (BMSPG). The BMSPG, an umbrella group of organizations concerned about fish and fish habitat, functioned as the local Fisheries Renewal BC delivery group. Although the BMSPG dissolved following the conclusion of Fisheries Renewal BC, Nadina spearheaded the drive to complete a watershed plan for the Bulkley.

The Morice River watershed was chosen as the priority watershed for Stage II WFSP planning following a condensed Stage I process for the Bulkley drainage. The concurrent Skeena Basin Level 1 WFSP, prepared by the Skeena Fisheries Commission, reinforced the need to create a plan for the Morice watershed through recommending Stage II planning for the Morice. Relative to other Stage II WFSPs, the Morice planning area is large, covering 4,349 km². The Morice watershed, located southwest of Houston, BC, is the largest tributary to the Bulkley River, and is one of the most important fish-producing watersheds in the Skeena drainage. It supports wild populations of steelhead, sockeye, chinook, coho and pink salmon, and a wide variety of resident trout, char, whitefish, sucker, minnow and other species. In addition to their inherent ecological value, these stocks have significant regional social and economic value, supporting commercial, recreational and First Nations fisheries.

Extremely valuable fish stocks combined with good opportunities to protect fish habitat favoured the selection of the Morice watershed for Stage II planning. Despite some heavily impacted tributaries, much of the fish habitat and the majority of fish stocks within the Morice are in relatively good condition. However, to delay fish-focused planning would put these valuable stocks at risk. Past fisheries management decisions have significantly influenced fish populations in the watershed and still present risks. Large-scale land use is relatively new to the area, with industrial forestry emerging in the early 1970s. Forestry remains by far the most significant development activity in the watershed, and the largest threat to fish habitat. Anticipated agricultural expansion and acid rock drainage from future mining activity also pose considerable risks to the sustainability of fish populations.

The objectives of this report are to provide:

- A summary of the challenges and successes faced in integrating the Morice WFSP process with other planning processes;
- Recommendations for improving WFSP linkages to LRMPs and forest plans; and
- Recommendations for increasing forest licensee investments into WFSPs.

2.0 LINKING THE MORICE WFSP WITH OTHER PLANS

The Morice WFSP is facing unique challenges and opportunities resulting from ongoing local public land use planning processes. Both the Morice Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) and the Morice and Lakes Innovative Forest Practices Agreement (IFPA) processes have been running concurrently with the WFSP, raising questions about integrating the plans. Despite resource shortages, participants have been working collaboratively to the benefit of all plans.

2.1 Integrating the Morice WFSP and the Morice LRMP

The initiation of the Morice LRMP midway through the Morice WFSP process provided opportunities for unique synergies. For example, the LRMP was able to take advantage of technical products created for the WFSP including digital maps and the Stage II biophysical profile (*Conserving Morice Watershed Fish Populations and their Habitat*). At the same time, the WFSP was able to incorporate issues and interests raised by the Fish and Fish Habitat Sector of the LRMP, thus strengthening public input into the WFSP. This helped ensure public issues were considered in the face of volunteer burnout from multiple planning processes. As the LRMP drew to a close earlier this year, the WFSP technical committee considered and worked with the LRMP objectives and management direction to develop its own complimentary and supportive objectives and project list.

Successes

The success of integrating the WFSP and LRMP is mainly attributed to cross-participation between the two processes. Members of the Fish and Fish Habitat Sector, the Wildlife Sector and the Forest Sector were familiar with both processes. The Fisheries Sector spokesperson, who was also the coordinator of the Morice WFSP, was able to promote the benefits of the WFSP at the LRMP and explain the complementary nature of the plans. Furthermore, relationships built in the LRMP were valuable in the WFSP. As a result of the interaction between processes, it is possible that the Morice LRMP will be stronger, require less revision over time, and have more certainty than other LRMPs that did not have the benefit of this interaction.

Specific Accomplishments included the following:

- Sharing information between processes;
- Incorporating language into the management direction of the LRMP that promotes coordinating activities and projects with the Morice WFSP;
- Promoting the Morice WFSP as a foundation for the “Watershed Advisory Committee,” an implementation and monitoring body recommended by the LRMP; and
- Obtaining support from the regional Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management staff for the Morice WFSP as a result of its association with the LRMP.

Challenges

- Working within the accelerated timeline of the LRMP – the rapid pace of the LRMP required the WFSP committee to reassess its connection to the LRMP in late 2003;
- Dealing with the different scales of the two processes - the LRMP covered a much larger area than the Morice watershed;
- Attracting consistent participation from industry, government and the public in the face of limited time and resources; and
- Determining appropriate targets and effectiveness indicators for objectives within the plans.

2.2 Use of the Morice WFSP by Forest Licensees and the IFPA

Difficulty was experienced in gaining the support of major forest licensees when the Morice WFSP was first initiated. The licensees felt that aquatic ecosystems and fish habitat were adequately addressed within the Innovative Forest Practices Agreement and they wished to avoid process duplication. Fortunately, a licensee biologist recognized an opportunity to use the expertise of the WFSP technical committee to significantly strengthen the aquatic management and monitoring component of the terrestrially biased IFPA. Licensee participation improved further when both the provincial and federal government demonstrated support for the process, and when the WFSP was recognized within the LRMP document.

The Morice WFSP is a product of its participants, including forest licensees. Through their participation, licensees are developing strategies to integrate the WFSP into their planning processes including the IFPA, Sustainable Forest Management Plans and Forest Stewardship Plans. The intent is to incorporate relevant components of the WFSP into the IFPA during its next review.

Projects outlined in the WFSP will assist licensees in:

- Developing best management practices;
- Developing effectiveness monitoring programs to comply with a “results-based” management regime;
- Setting priorities for habitat rehabilitation plans; and
- Implementing culvert assessment protocols and culvert replacement plans.

3.0 LINKING WFSP TO LAND USE AND FORESTRY PLANS

3.1 LRMPs

The Morice WFSP benefited from the unique timing and cross-participation that allowed it to be recognized by an active LRMP process. However, most WFSPs are occurring in areas with existing LRMPs and therefore play more of a role in the implementation of the LRMP rather than informing its development. In these situations, process integration may be successful if WFSP committees:

- Involve interested LRMP participants in the ongoing work of the WFSP;
- Use fish or aquatic related objectives and strategies within LRMPs to:
 - ♦ direct the formation of WFSP committees, and

- ♦ guide the strategic direction for the WFSP;
- Discuss with the LRMP monitoring / implementation committee how the WFSP might complement or supplement the LRMP:
 - ♦ examine potential partnerships and synergies,
 - ♦ find a champion within the LRMP committee to support and promote WFSP, and / or
 - ♦ develop a monitoring or restoration strategy on behalf of the LRMP monitoring committee.

3.2 Sustainable Resource Management Plans

In some cases, opportunities exist to link WFSPs to the provincial land use planning hierarchy through Sustainable Resource Management Plans (SRMP). WFSP could form a component of a chapter on fish habitat, riparian ecosystems or aquatic ecosystem management. The provincial government should examine opportunities to partner with WFSPs when initiating SRMPs.

3.3 Innovative Forest Practices Agreements and Sustainable Forest Management Plans

Successful integration of WFSP into forestry plans and operations requires support and participation from forest licensees. Without participation, garnering licensee buy-in will be difficult.

Involving licensees

- 1) WFSP coordinators could improve plan integration by determining how the forest licensees in the area would benefit from the WFSP process through the following steps:
 - a) Identify licensee staff members that are:
 - ♦ interested in protecting fish habitat – either because it is their job (e.g. the company biologist) or because they have a personal interest in sustaining fish populations (e.g. anglers), and
 - ♦ familiar with the company's sustainable forest management plans;
 - b) Identify how a watershed planning process concentrating on riparian and fish habitat could complement licensee activities (i.e. do they feel their existing plans are comprehensive); and
 - c) Determine early what the industry expects, wants or needs from the process.
- 2) Develop a strategy to increase the appeal of WFSP
 - ♦ Find a “champion” within the industry;
 - ♦ Emphasize the synergies created by working collaboratively;
 - ♦ Emphasize the lost opportunities to licensees if they are not involved;
 - ♦ Emphasize the benefits of WFSP to certification, including public participation;
 - ♦ Point out that WFSP will reduce the risk of a stock or species being listed under the *Species at Risk Act* - saving major headaches and costs in the future;
 - ♦ Determine what to ask the companies for – a representative, data, or funding
 - be prepared to outline proposed or current support from the public and the Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management and Fisheries and Oceans Canada;
 - ♦ Involve licensees early in the process to facilitate planning that meets their needs;

- ◆ Try to attract respected experts in hydrology, fisheries and aquatic sciences to your technical committee – industry will be attracted to quality; and
- ◆ Offer to help fill gaps in their plans (aquatic environments are often an afterthought).

4) Tie the WFSP to an LRMP (see section 3.1)

- ◆ Linking the WFSP to the LRMP will elevate the profile of the WFSP.

4.0 INCREASING FOREST LICENSEE INVESTMENTS INTO WFSPS

Licencees are hesitant to fund strategic planning or research using their core budgets. They have become accustomed to finance restoration and research through government programs funded by stumpage.

Forest licensees will only invest in WFSPs if:

- ◆ The benefits outweigh the costs (e.g. assists with certification, builds relationships, saves money over the long-term, allows flexible harvesting opportunities);
- ◆ They are approached as a partner (i.e. not asked to pay the entire bill);
- ◆ Government supports the process through participation and funding;
- ◆ The alternatives are worse (i.e. standardized rules and prescriptions);
- ◆ Fish and aquatic ecosystems are made a priority (if not, the ever-shrinking funding pot will flow somewhere else);
- ◆ The WFSP has a high profile; and
- ◆ The right people are involved – people with expertise and influence (including First Nations and government representatives).

Some forest licensees may be more apt to fund research or other projects identified in WFSPs rather than the planning process itself, particularly if:

- They have had an opportunity for input into the projects,
- The projects benefit their operations (i.e. the development of best management practices), and
- FIA or a similar funding source can fund the projects.

Finally, as the economic outlook for the forest industry improves, the government should consider redesigning the Forest Investment Account program to require licensees to provide 50% partnership funding. Such action may stimulate greater investment into research, leading to increasingly innovative practices that benefit the both forest industry and our aquatic resources.