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Abnormally dry conditions threaten the viability of juvenile coho, steelhead and cutthroat stocks on Vancouver Island and southern BC.

Nanaimo: As part of its Living Rivers Georgia Basin/Vancouver Island (LR-GB/VI) program, and associated with the province's Living Water Smart initiative, the BC Conservation Foundation (BCCF) is monitoring flows on east coast Vancouver Island streams that are particularly susceptible to drought.

Late July, fisheries staff from BCCF and Nanoose First Nation measured stream flows and temperatures in the South Englishman River, the Englishman's largest tributary.

The Englishman River is one of the most important salmonid bearing streams on the central east coast of Vancouver Island. The watershed supports all five species of anadromous salmon as well as resident rainbow and cutthroat trout. In 2000, the BC government designated the Englishman as a sensitive stream under the Fish Protection Act. Coho, steelhead and cutthroat spend up to three years rearing in coastal rivers, surviving mainly on aquatic insects. However, this summer streams are shrinking, with greater competition for space and food. Insect production is directly linked to flow through riffle habitats – the fast, shallow stretches between pools. The faster and deeper the riffle, the greater the insect production.

In the South Englishman, near the bottom of the 83 km² sub-basin, BCCF has been operating a hydrometric station. Total discharge was measured at just 18 litres per second. Habitat suitability for insects was also very poor. BCCF Project Manager James Craig explained. "That volume is less than 1% of the stream's mean annual discharge (MAD), a far cry from what most experts suggest is an adequate base flow of 20%MAD to sustain the fisheries resource for rearing or spawning." In addition to the low flows, water temperatures ranged from 19.8 to 23°C, further stressing juvenile fish.

On the Englishman mainstem, water is normally released July through October from Arrowsmith Reservoir to meet domestic water demands in the service area and significantly improve fisheries flow during the summer and early fall. However, this year due to low snow pack and lack of spring rainfall, the reservoir never reached full capacity, peaking at the end of June at one metre below full supply level. Drought conditions observed since then have lead reservoir operators and fisheries agencies to agree on a reduced base flow as a precautionary step to ensure there is sufficient water to enhance fish habitat and provide for domestic requirements for the rest of the summer.

In the coming decades, water demands for domestic use are anticipated to continue to grow in the Englishman River and compete with essential instream flows for fish in both mainstem and side channel habitats. To this end, LR-GB/VI, the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund, and the Pacific Salmon Commission are supporting a multi-year assessment of feasibility for small scale water storage in the sub-basin, which, if built, would improve summer base flows for fish particularly during drought conditions such those currently being experienced in east coast Vancouver Island streams.

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