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Enhanced off-channel fish habitat in the Sarita River, west of Port Alberni, is now more productive and better protected against floods following extensive improvements completed this summer.

PORT ALBERNI: In cooperation with Island Timberlands (landowner), Huu-ay-aht First Nation (HFN) and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), the BC Conservation Foundation (BCCF) supervised a project aimed at improving the quality of salmon and trout habitat in the Sarita's groundwater side channel (at 56km), first built in the summer of 2006. Fortifying the flood protection dyke around the complex was also a high priority.

The South Sarita Side Channel, known to the Huu-ay-aht people as *Uu-a-thluk*, which means 'Taking Care Of', was originally built to provide much needed off-channel habitat for coho and chum salmon. A study of the Sarita Watershed (Huu-ay-aht, 1998) showed that coho smolt production is limited by a lack of stable over-wintering habitat that provides refuge during extreme high flow conditions.

Uu-a-thluk now provides 7,545 square metres of high quality juvenile rearing habitat. BCCF Project Manager, Jeramy Damborg said, "Coho production in the Sarita Watershed should increase substantially in the first few years, with the channel producing as many as 7,500 smolts annually." Added Damborg, "Steelhead and cutthroat trout as well as chum salmon will also use the channel's protected habitats for some of their early life stages."

Structural integrity of the original side channel was compromised during a significant November 2006 flood. Its protective berm failed and the river broke through in three places infilling a large portion of the channel and degrading much of its habitat. Since then, fish production from the channel has been much lower than anticipated.

Heavy equipment was used over two weeks this August to upgrade 400 metres of the berm, excavate the channel to its design depth, place rock armouring at key areas for additional protection, and complex the habitat with large woody debris (LWD). Replanting of native streamside vegetation will be undertaken by HFN over the next several weeks.

Stephan Auchman, HFN Fisheries Program Manager says any initiative or project that will increase the number of fish coming back to the Sarita River is well supported by HFN. "HFN has invested 65-thousand dollars over the past 15 years into restoration projects on the Sarita. Slowly, but surely, one side channel at a time, the river is now recuperating and it is encouraging to see salmon returns numbering in the thousands instead of hundreds."

The \$75,000 channel improvement project was cost-shared with BC's Living Rivers Trust Fund (managed on Vancouver Island by BCCF) contributing \$45,000, HFN providing \$20,000 in partnership with the Pacific Salmon Foundation, and DFO adding \$15,000 in engineering in-kind support.

Channel conditions and fish use will be monitored by HFN fisheries personnel this coming winter.

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