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Eco-battle emerging over fish and multibillion-dollar resort
Steelhead stream threatened by ski hill, report says. Developer disagrees

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The Brohm, one of two main steelhead nurseries for the Squamish River system, enjoys a naturally high level of phosphorus because of the volcanic geology of the area. That chemical supports an ideal food chain for raising fish.

CREDIT: Vancouver Sun File

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A classic fish-versus-development battle is heating up in Squamish at the proposed site of a multibillion-dollar ski resort and housing development.

Proponents of the Garibaldi At Squamish project at Brohm Ridge north of town are pitching their development as a financial boon for the economy of the community and the province, offering thousands of jobs, tourism activity and an estimated \$8 billion in construction activity and spinoffs.

However a new environmental study obtained by The Vancouver Sun indicates that the project would devastate the Brohm River -- one of the most productive wild steelhead and salmon streams in B.C.

Steelhead are large, seagoing rainbow trout that are the most prized freshwater sport fish in the province, but they are at death's door throughout their range in the Georgia Basin -- even on streams supported by hatcheries -- because of habitat destruction and poor ocean survival conditions.

Brohm River is described in the report as "unique" in its exceptional ability to support young steelhead before their migration to the ocean -- five times as productive for fish as a typical B.C. south coast river.

A report commissioned by the B.C. Conservation Foundation, paid for with money from sport fishing licence sales, says the Brohm's remarkable stream chemistry is the key.

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Only two other B.C. streams, the Upper Dean River and the Blackwater River, have similar chemistry and both of those rank among the top angling streams on the planet.

The Garibaldi At Squamish development is proposed for the stream's headwaters at Brohm Ridge and includes extensive water management plans, including up to five dams, extractions of water for snowmaking, golf course irrigation and potable water supply, storm water and sewage discharge, plus resort development that includes hotels, condominiums and other homes with a combined 22,000 bed units.

The report, written by former B.C. government steelhead biologist Pat Slaney, says the project would need to bring water in from another source to augment local resources to "ensure that a water demand-fish flow crisis does not develop over time." The report also suggests that fertilizer runoff from the golf courses, and chemicals used in snow-making, could unbalance the stream's beneficial chemistry.

The project was first submitted to the province's Environmental Assessment Office in 1997 and resubmitted in 2007.

The assessment is now on hiatus while the proponents develop more data on the hydrology of the area, and is not expected to resume until January 2009.

Craig Orr, executive director of Watershed Watch Salmon Society, said it is "ironic" that the proposal is being examined at a time when the government is promoting its new Living Water Smart program including conservation and protection of streams and lakes

He said the B.C. government must decide if it's more concerned about preserving streams, or promoting development.

Jack Cooley of Squamish Streamkeepers said his group is actively working to restore previous damage to fish habitat in the Brohm.

Cooley called the development a "real-estate grab" and said the Streamkeepers oppose it.

Garibaldi At Squamish president and CEO Mike Esler described Slaney's work as "pure speculation."

He said the company believes its project can be a model for water conservation.

"We are going to be a very green resort, no question," he said in an interview.

He said he "disagreed" that the project would adversely impact stream chemistry.

"We are all over this. We are going to make sure this is done right."

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