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Juvenile fish production from two Central Vancouver Island Rivers is being assessed this spring to gauge effectiveness of new side-channel habitats.

NANAIMO: In late April - early May, juvenile salmonids begin their migration journey to the open ocean from hundreds of Vancouver Island rivers and streams. BC Conservation Foundation project manager, James Craig, says it's the time of the year when we see how well young steelhead trout and coho salmon have survived the previous 1-3 years of rearing in freshwater habitats. "The primary focus of these stock assessments is to compare pre-restoration smolt production to that generated with the aid of newly constructed side-channels and summer stream flow improvements," said Craig.

In a project supported by BC's Living Rivers Trust Fund, Ministry of Environment (MoE), Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) and the Community Fisheries Development Centre (CFDC), smolt counting fences have been installed on the lower Millstone River in downtown Nanaimo, and on side-channels in Englishman River Regional Park, near Parksville.

The Englishman River is one of the most important salmon-producing streams on the mid-east coast of Vancouver Island. It is designated a sensitive stream by the BC Government under the Fish Protection Act and has been the focus of a strategic recovery plan since 2001. The recovery plan identified steelhead and coho smolt enumeration as necessary to develop baseline information and to follow stock abundance trends in response to recovery efforts. Since 2006, side-channel habitats have been enhanced and greatly expanded adjacent to the Englishman. This year's smolt fence was placed near the side-channel's downstream end, allowing a full enumeration of the entire channel complex. Catches are monitored daily by CFDC. CFDC Fisheries Habitat Coordinator, Ardith Morris, says data collected provides valuable insight into production trends and will help guide future habitat restoration projects.

A secondary enumeration occurs on the lower Englishman mainstem using a Rotary Screw Trap (RST). The RST floats on the water surface and captures young fish when water enters the upstream end of a trapping cone. Smolts migrating at night enter the cone and are funnelled back into a live box. The RSTs are checked daily by the CFDC and coho and steelhead smolts are counted, measured and released unharmed to the river.

In the fall of 2007, the Millstone Bowen Park Bypass Channel was completed. It is estimated that 300-500 returning adult coho swam through the new channel and as far as the headwaters of the Millstone River that year. Additionally, 27,000 coho fry from the Nanaimo Hatchery were transplanted into Brannen Lake and the Millstone River in spring 2008. These juveniles are now migrating to the ocean as 1 year-old smolts and will return as adults in the fall of 2010. Results of fish enumeration will more clearly demonstrate the cost-benefit of these important projects designed to sustain Vancouver Island's valuable salmon and trout resources.

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