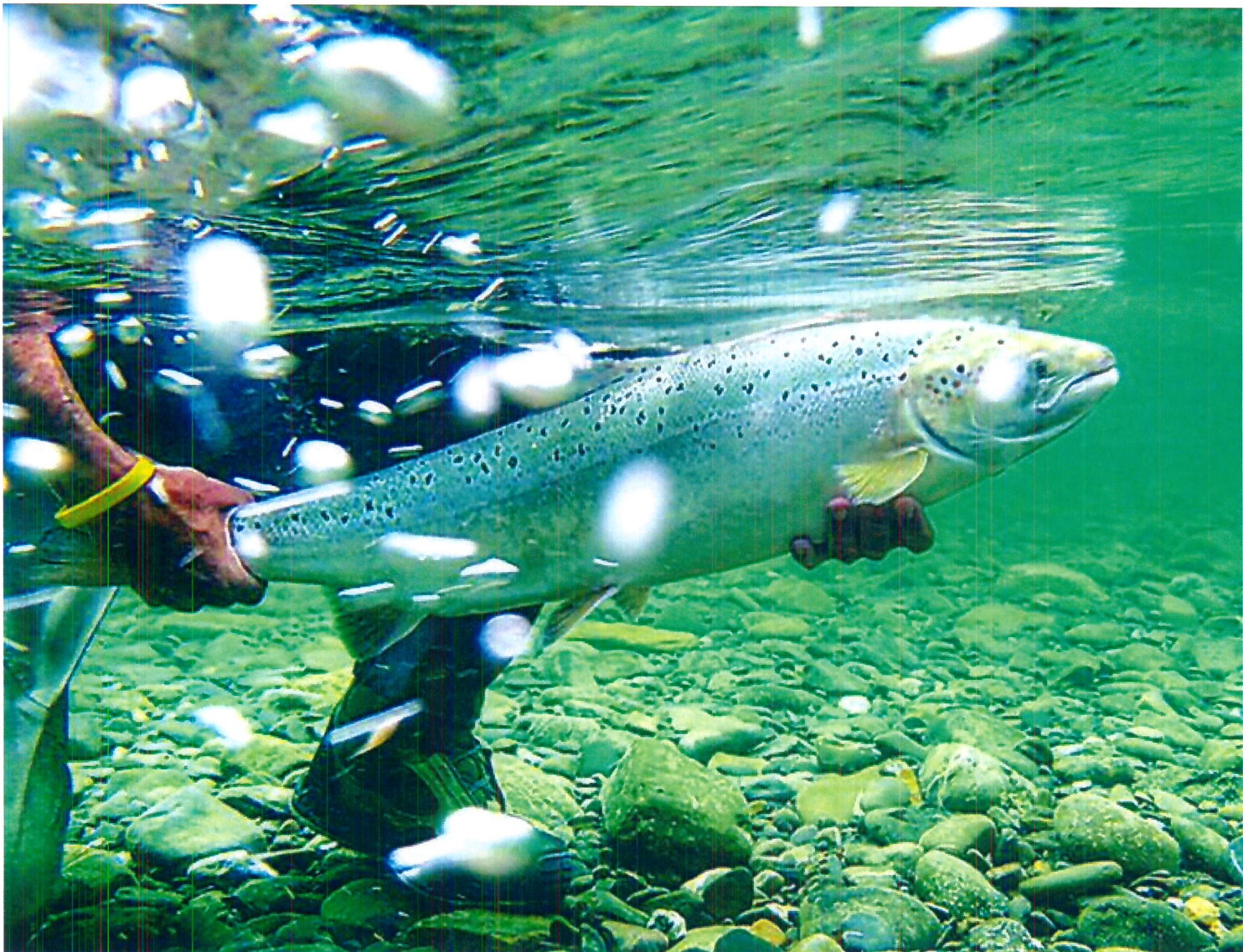


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NEWS

DFO explores possible changes to recreational salmon fishery on the Miramichi



Fisheries and Oceans Canada recently presented stakeholders in New Brunswick with a discussion paper that included scenarios for managing recreational Atlantic salmon fisheries around various stock sizes.

Photo: Submitted

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Nathan DeLong | Miramichi Leader



A discussion paper circulated last month by fisheries managers explores various scenarios for the Miramichi River's recreational salmon fishery, but conservationists aren't currently anticipating any major changes.

The paper from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), obtained by the Miramichi Leader, includes a diagram with various population scenarios for wild Atlantic salmon in the watershed and how DFO might manage a fishery around those situations.

Mark Hambrook, Miramichi Salmon Association president, said the document is meant to provide stakeholders with an idea of what could happen if populations reach different levels.

"It doesn't say 'this is what's going to happen.' It is simply providing examples," he said.

"These scenarios are being put out there so that stakeholders can come back with changes or more feedback."

The diagram includes the possibility of limiting the angling season to spring only if salmon numbers in the Miramichi system fall below half of the limit reference point – which is 1.5 eggs per square metre of habitat.

According to a 2018 DFO report on reference points for salmon rivers in the department's Gulf region, spawning numbers coming in below the reference point could mean trouble for the population.

According to Hambrook, the Southwest Miramichi and Northwest Miramichi Rivers both missed those targets in 2019, with the Northwest falling short of conservation goals for several years.

Estimates provided by DFO earlier this year suggest adult salmon counts in the Miramichi watershed totalled 6,300 last year, with 5,200 adults returning to the Southwest to spawn and 1,100 large salmon coming back to the Northwest. That's down from 14,700 in the Southwest and 3,900 adults in the Northwest in 2018, or a total of 18,600.

The previous record low for the Miramichi was set in 2014, Hambrook said, when 10,270 adult salmon plied the river. That included 8,940 large salmon in the Southwest and 1,235 in the Northwest branch.

"We are in a situation where serious harm can occur to our stocks of fish because of genetics," Hambrook said in a previous interview.



Other scenarios include limiting the angling season to spring and fall if stocks are within 50 to 75 per cent of the reference point, and maintaining the regular season length with hook-and-release rules if the reference point is reached.

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The discussion paper suggests populations exceeding the limit reference point and considered to be in the cautious status by DFO could support gradual moves toward a retention fishery, with an open, normal-length season and a licence draw for grilse.

Further increases in stock sizes could allow a regular season with one grilse (a salmon which has returned to freshwater after a single winter at sea) retention tag issued per fishing licence, according to the document. Populations reaching the healthy status could allow anglers to keep two grilse.

“It’s a progressive thing,” said Hambrook. “There are examples for what could be done if there aren’t enough fish to go around, such as spring fishing only or whatever.”

Hambrook said the discussion paper includes lots of good ideas, and while measures are needed to reverse declining salmon stocks, neither he nor his association would advocate for a full fishery closure. He said fish mortality rates from hook-and-release angling are low and that keeping people on the river helps deter poaching and other illegal fishing activities.

DFO spokeswoman Chantal Roussel confirmed a discussion paper was shared at the Eastern New Brunswick Recreational Fisheries Advisory Committee meeting in January, giving an example of how a precautionary approach decision model for recreational Atlantic salmon angling might look. The meeting allowed Indigenous groups and other stakeholders to provide input on how salmon and striped bass fisheries are managed every year.

She said the example included possible management decisions based on the status of stocks in the Miramichi River’s two main branches, ranging from a closure of the recreational fishery to increased fishing with retention.

Roussel said no decision has been made yet on the 2020 season for the Atlantic salmon recreational fishery in New Brunswick. DFO announces its recreational angling rules every year in April.

“The presentation was meant as an example for discussion purposes only, and to refine this example or to create other examples with the help of stakeholders,” said Roussel.

“The decline of Atlantic salmon in New Brunswick and across Canada is a serious concern, and DFO remains committed to promoting the recovery of wild Atlantic Salmon stocks.”

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