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Willow Creek fish passage improved

Work to improve fish passage in Willow Creek is complete, and fish are timing their movement upstream with high tides and fall rain.

Two rock weirs have been constructed in the creek beneath the Highway 19A bridge to help fish get over a series of pipes that had been exposed when the creek bed eroded. The pipes are owned by the City and Telus, who worked with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), consultants, and local stewardship groups to design the series of weirs that allow the fish to pass over the pipes.

Fish have been observed freely making their way over the weirs and continuing upstream to spawn during high tides, and more rain will increase flow in the creek and improve fish passage.

The migration of spawning salmon into small local streams such as Willow Creek is naturally limited by instream conditions such as water flow level and water temperature. The weirs work with the natural conditions to allow fish access into and out of the creek according to their natural migration timing.

Project biologists, including Mainstream Biological, DFO and Willow Creek Streamkeepers will continue to monitor the effect of the weirs and pools.

“The design relies on the fall and winter rains to bring natural debris down the creek as well as tidal action to help naturalize the small spaces in the rock weirs,” says Monica Stewardson from Mainstream Biological. *“As these spaces fill naturally, more water will flow over the top of the weirs rather than between the larger rocks.”*

“This is a marked improvement over this time last year when fish passage was severely restricted, and the Streamkeepers, with help from the City, built a temporary sand bag weir,” says Stacey Larsen, Greenways Land Trust board member.

“More rain will improve fish passage,” adds Chuck DeSorcy, Willow Creek Streamkeeper. *“Until the gaps fill in, fish will hold below the weirs and in the estuary awaiting higher water levels. Since this area of the creek is tidal, the fish can get over the weirs for part of the time each day.”*

With a very high run of pink salmon, many people are taking advantage of the opportunity to see the fish in action.

“Please watch the fish from the bridge above or from the top of the bank to give them a little breathing room. If you get too close, fish get stressed out and they are particularly vulnerable with low creek flows,” advises Larsen. *“There is no need to catch the fish and relocate them above the weirs as they will move up on their own when the tide is right and rain increases creek flow.”*

“We urge people to leave everything in place around the weirs,” says Mark DeGagne from McElhanney who is the design engineer on the project. *“It is important that the rocks are left in place and that none of the underlying filter cloth is exposed.”*

“We appreciate the work of all our partners to complete the project in time for the fish to move upstream,” says Ron Neufeld, deputy city manager and general manager of operations for the City of Campbell River. *“The next step in the process is to replant the banks of the creek that were disturbed by machines moving rock for the weirs.”*

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Contact: Ron Neufeld, Deputy City Manager and General Manager Operations 250-286-5765