

# Colquitz coho run disappoints; construction cited as possible cause

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Amy Smart / Times Colonist

DECEMBER 29, 2016 06:00 AM

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Plastic barriers are used to keep chemicals and debris from reaching Colquitz River during construction of the McKenzie interchange.  
Photograph By ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

Fewer coho salmon returned to the Colquitz River after sediment was released into the river as a result of the McKenzie Interchange construction project, a steward says.

Dorothy Chambers, who volunteers as project lead for Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Colquitz fish-counting fence, said she was expecting higher returns than the 1,121 fish that have been counted.

There were two incidents where mud and silt spilled into the river as part of the construction project at the end of November that could have been factors, she said.

The province has since bolstered environmental monitoring on the site.

"I can't say this is what caused the change, I can only report the numbers," Chambers said. But, she added, "I was expecting hundreds more still."

Salmon abruptly stopped entering the stream after the first sediment spill on Nov. 23, she said. Many swam up the nearby Craigflower Creek, also a salmon-bearing waterway.

After three or four days, they began returning to Colquitz and 21 fish were counted.

Then on Nov. 28, a berm was breached, allowing more cloudy water into the Colquitz farther upstream. Just two fish were counted after that.

"We weren't expecting that it would end that early," Chambers said. "I would have thought that by the third week of November, we were about halfway through the run."

In a typical year, coho return up until about Christmas, she said.

The 1,121-fish count is mostly coho, but also includes 12 cutthroat trout and one chum.

The number still represents a significant increase from last year, when 265 fish were counted. Chambers said 2015 was anticipated to be an extremely low-number year, since a blob of warm water in the Pacific Ocean brought non-native species north to compete with salmon, she said.

About 1,200 fish were counted in 2013, and 1,600 were counted in 2014.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada has not completed its counts for coho returns in the province yet. But numbers varied geographically, it said.

There were improved returns in northern B.C., the west coast of Vancouver Island and the Strait of Georgia in recent years, DFO said.

Returns remained poor on the Fraser River, despite heavy limitations on fishing.

"Survival rates remain variable and are still below historic highs in most areas," the ministry said.

Transportation Minister Todd Stone has said that enhanced environmental protections should prevent further spills of mud into the Colquitz River.

The ministry introduced 24-hour monitoring, upgraded water-filtration systems and new barriers to prevent dirty water from getting into the salmon-bearing river, but was criticized for not having adequate monitors in place before the spill.

[asmart@timescolonist.com](mailto:asmart@timescolonist.com)

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