

Gutting Fisheries Act frustrates former fisheries minister



By Kelowna Capital News

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The former federal fisheries minister who implemented many of the changes protecting habitat in today's Fisheries Act is passionate in his objection to what he calls a "gutting of the act."

While admitting there's no new wording yet to comment on, Tom Siddon says he's heard what both the federal fisheries minister and the federal agriculture minister have to say on the changes being proposed to the act, and he's not at all impressed.

Siddon is a member of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, representing the Okanagan Similkameen Regional District, and he made a presentation to the board Tuesday outlining his concerns.

"If we (as a nation) no longer have concerns about fish, why should we worry about protecting fish flows in streams," he questioned.

Water utilities are constrained to ensure they don't draw so much water from streams or lakes that it endangers habitat for fish, because of the federal legislation, but with proposed changes removing habitat protection from the act, there would be more water available for people to use.

When word of the proposed changes was first leaked nearly a month ago by a former federal fisheries biologist, Otto Langer, there was widespread reaction against the move, including a letter signed by

hundreds of pre-eminent Canadian scientists.

Siddon pointed out to his water board colleagues that the fisheries minister is responsible first of all to look after fish, so to weaken the legislation by removing the protection of fish habitat and by moving from protection of all fish to fish of "economic, cultural or ecological value," would be doing the opposite.

He referred to efforts by the federal and provincial fisheries departments and the Okanagan Nation Alliance, along with organizations south of the international boundary, to bring salmon back to the Okanagan system by restoring habitat, and said this would seem to tell the world that the federal government in fact doesn't feel that's important.

"This legislation would reduce the Fisheries Act to just protecting major commercial species of fish," he commented. Use of the act here in the interior would be eradicated, he added.

He was incensed that in addition to the changes to the Fisheries Act, the federal Environmental Protection Act is being repealed—all part of an omnibus bill expected to reach the House of Commons in June. "The trick is to throw a lot of controversial things into one bill and wham it through parliament," commented Siddon.

Seeing the legislation that was passed while he was minister watered down like this is extremely agitating, he said.

"This threatens to blacken Canada's name at the international level," he added.

"We're going back a quarter of a century to produce jobs," he said, referring to his suspicion that the reasoning for the changes is to permit big industry to build oil pipelines through the rainforest without the process that's currently required to ensure it won't do harm to the environment.

"Jobs at what cost?" he questioned.

Board members discussed writing a letter to the federal government expressing concerns about changes that would alter consideration of water as habitat for fish.

They opted to have staff draft a letter reflecting their discussion for the June meeting of the board.

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