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Salmon swimming past Big Bar Landslide



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Pink salmon, along with Sockeye and Chinook, are now successfully swimming past the Big Bar Landslide. Radio tag evidence shows Chinook began to make it past the blockage on August 12, and Sockeye on August 26. It was unclear until now whether Pink, a smaller species, would be able to swim upstream through the turbulent water created by the landslide.

On September 4, radio tag data showed Pinks migrating upstream via the partly restored natural passage. This represents a significant milestone for the 180-person team that has been working since late June, when the landslide was discovered, to restore natural passage.

Upwards of 130,000 salmon have succeeded in swimming past the landslide to date, with more than 100,000 passing since August 31. This is due to lower water levels, along with the efforts of rock scaling crews that have been restoring the passage. Hydroacoustic monitoring indicate nearly as many salmon are passing Churn Creek, 40 kilometres upstream of the slide, as are passing the monitoring station downstream, suggesting more than 85 percent of salmon are making it through.



Photo by Gina Anderson @gina-gerl imaging.

As a result of salmon being able to swim past the landslide, transport operations are on hold. While Pink salmon are now traversing the passage, they have yet to arrive in large numbers. Estimates vary widely, but as many as 800,000 Pinks could arrive. First Nations seining crews are standing by, the road to allow ground transport is ready along with helicopters, and the Incident Management Team is prepared to resume transporting salmon if the need arises.

Over the past six weeks, more than 60,000 salmon were captured and flown by helicopter upstream of the landslide. First Nations seining crews, fish wheel operators, archaeological monitors and fish health specialists worked alongside wildfire fighters, scientists, pilots, rock scalers and swiftwater experts in a monumental effort to reduce the impact of the landslide on future salmon stocks.

Preliminary estimates suggest that, prior to September 4 when fish transportation was paused due to large numbers swimming through on their own, the team moved about a third of the Chinook and a quarter of the Sockeye that arrived below the slide. For some Sockeye, such as the early Stuart and Bowron runs, and the earliest Chinook, it is likely the only spawners this year will be those moved by these crews. While the proportion of salmon saved won't be clear for some time, without the efforts of so many dedicated people, most of this year's run up to the past week would have been lost.

Rock scalers continue their work to maintain and improve natural passage as water levels fluctuate. Monitoring is ongoing to track fish swimming past the landslide, their upstream travel, behaviour and health. The team continues to work on longer-term plans and consider every possible option to protect the salmon for future generations.