

The Gate that Changed Their World



Salmon River Flood Pump Station in Langley, BC, Canada

Today, March 12, 2021, **was a good day**, here on the Salmon River in Fort Langley.

The annual salmon run has begun. **What?** you say, I thought salmon ran into the rivers in the fall, when the rains begin here on the West Coast. Ah, that is true, for adult Coho and Chum salmon do come into the river in the fall moving far upstream to their spawning grounds on the Salmon River near Williams Park, or upstream as far as the Abbotsford/Langley border, the very headwaters of the Salmon River and its major tributary, the Coghlan Creek.

But the salmon that were seen running up into the Salmon River today in little schools dimpling the water surface like rain drops, were not adult salmon, but young salmon just starting out, called fry, about half the length of your little finger, 42 millimeters in length to be precise and they were not Coho salmon or Chum salmon but

Chinook salmon, the mightiest and most charismatic salmon of our Pacific Province.

These Chinook fry almost certainly came from the Harrison River, up near Agassiz. This river is a mighty tributary of the lower Fraser River and home to the largest Chinook population in the entire Fraser River watershed and in fact the largest Chinook population in the entire British Columbia.

The reason this run is so strong is that the clean waters from Harrison Lake flow over the bright gravels brought down into the Harrison River from the mountains by the Chehalis River and this makes conditions for spawning Chinook salmon almost ideal. This part of the Harrison River, known as the "Rapids", is home to more salmon of every type that anywhere else in Beautiful British Columbia a fact known since time immemorial by the Sts'ailes people, who's main village lies here.

Back to those **little finger fry** seen today in Fort Langley, who emerged from their spawning beds in the Harrison River just days ago, swam down that river to the brown and comforting Fraser River and rode the currents to our home stream, the Salmon River, here in Fort Langley. As this part of the lower Fraser River is affected by the ocean tides from the Salish Sea, these little fish waited until an incoming tide that would push the rising brown waters of the Fraser River into the lower Salmon River, through a specially designed **"fish gate"** operated by the Township of Langley staff at the Salmon River Pump Station.

The Pump Station protects the floodplain that wraps around Fort Langley from flooding when the Fraser River is in summer high-water freshet. This large structure is crossed by the "Fort to Fort" trail at the mouth of the Salmon River and it is through this little but vastly important "fish gate" that all the young Harrison River Chinook fry must pass before swimming another 6.0 kilometers up the lower Salmon River.



Chinook juvenile ready to ride the flowing waters to the sea

The daily tides pushing in give a free ride upstream to these little fish who are just seeking out quiet places all along the lower Fraser River floodplain streams and estuary to feed and grow for the next month or two before heading down to the big ocean. The

Salmon River, is known as **"critical habitat"** for this Harrison River Chinook population and is one such place, lucky enough to have an automatic fish gate that protects the lands along the river from flooding but also allows little fish to pass under the great concrete mountains called "Flood Infrastructure" that exist all along the lower Fraser River.

Into these quiet sloughs and low gradient streams and tidal channels these little fish seek out, they enter and grow and quadruple in weight and double in length by May before they turn their noses back downstream and head out on their great adventure, riding flowing waters to the sea.

In four- or five-years' time they will return as broad-shouldered silver sided adults to feed our precious Southern Resident Killer Whales, our anglers and fishers, our First Peoples, our bears, our wolves and almost everything that crawls, walks or swims in our forests and streams and finally feed the trees themselves as their bodies pass on the marine derived nutrients collected in the great north gyre far off out in the open Pacific Ocean.



Spawning Chinook Salmon

Today is **truly a good day**, the wheel of life turns as it should, we can watch and protect and celebrate and be truly thankful we live in this great place and watch over our little river, the Salmon River, one of many things that make British Columbia and Langley such a special place on this earth. Thanks to all those who work hard each day to keep our complicated world working just a little bit better.

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