Reconstruction of an ecosystem, Cheakamus River sodium hydroxide derailment – 10 years later

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Ever wonder what happens when you wipe a river clean of aquatic life?

An exaggeration yes, but that was the opinion of the public, media, environmental groups and regulatory agencies following the August 5, 2005 sodium hydroxide spill into the Cheakamus River north of Vancouver, BC.

Over 500,000 fish were estimated to have been killed, representing 10 species including steelhead, rainbow trout, 5 species of Pacific salmon, char, other non-sport species, and benthic invertebrates. The slug of pH 14 chemical entered the river from a ruptured tank car following a derailment and continued downstream for approximately 16km before entering saltwater, neutralizing it's corrosive effects.

In the 10 years since the spill, CN has worked closely with Agencies, the community, First Nations, local environmental groups and interested citizens to restore the fish populations back to near original conditions. To support CN's efforts, a Technical Committee, Steering Committee, Stakeholder Team and website were developed to ensure all data and information produced during the recovery and monitoring work was 100% available.

On the ground work was implemented to create/enhance fish habitat for target species, supplement fish hatchery programs, undertake extensive study and monitoring programs as well as create a funding program to encourage local environmental groups and citizens to undertake their own habitat projects applicable to the Cheakamus watershed.

Success of the program was not just the commitment to doing the right thing, and actually doing it, but it was engaging with the public in a way that we'd never done before. The end result was a positive and trusting relationship where open discussion and dialogue were possible. With all our success over the last 10 years, CN will officially close the Cheakamus program in 2016 without public resistance and leave a positive legacy for the future.