



The University of British Columbia Sustainable Seafood Project
Assessing sustainability of RAINBOW TROUT and STEELHEAD purchasing at UBC
Executive Summary – May 2007

Rainbow trout and steelhead products make up a small percentage of the University of British Columbia (UBC) food services menu. In late 2006, the UBC Sustainable Seafood project recommended changes in sourcing to improve the sustainability of such purchases. Rainbow trout farmed in freshwater flow-through systems are currently the most sustainable option for rainbow trout and steelhead products. It is recommended that UBC purchase these products, while avoiding rainbow trout/steelhead reared in coastal floating cages or net-pens.

The UBC Sustainable Seafood project is a consortium that includes UBC Food Services, AMS Food and Beverage, Green College, Fisheries Centre, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, and UBC Sustainability Office¹. The partnership of students, faculty, and staff strives to make all UBC seafood purchases as ecologically, economical, and socially sustainable as possible. Having agreed on steps to increase sustainability of five other seafood products, the partners turned their attention to rainbow trout and steelhead in September 2006.

Analysis of rainbow trout and steelhead products found that labeling of the products can be ambiguous. Rainbow trout and steelhead belong to the same species, but exhibit different life histories. Rainbow trout remain in freshwater for the duration of their lives while steelhead migrate to the ocean and return to freshwater streams only to spawn. In the marketing of trout products, the differences between these types are sometimes ignored and the names “rainbow trout” and “steelhead” are used interchangeably. For example, fish raised entirely in freshwater are labelled as “steelhead.”

UBC food service providers purchase a small amount of rainbow trout/steelhead. Less than 2% of all seafood purchasing (by weight) was rainbow trout/steelhead products. All “rainbow trout” products purchased by UBC came from flow-through aquaculture systems, while “steelhead” products came from either freshwater or marine floating cages or net-pens.

The sustainability of rainbow trout/steelhead aquaculture relies on the degree of isolation from the natural aquatic environment. Freshwater flow-through systems are of intermediate sustainability. Effluent from flow through systems is a conservation concern as effluent contains excess nutrients, feces, suspended solids, and pathogens that can be passed to the natural environment. Aquaculture of steelhead/rainbow trout in marine or freshwater floating cages is unsustainable. Water pollution, disease transfer to wild fish, and escapes of farm fish are the major concerns with floating cage production.

The project has determined that clear sourcing information for rainbow trout/steelhead products is necessary for sustainable product selection. Once sources are confirmed, it is recommended that UBC opt for rainbow trout/steelhead products from freshwater flow-through aquaculture systems and encourage its suppliers to adopt thorough effluent treatment methods. Rainbow trout and steelhead raised in marine or freshwater cages should not be purchased. The products of local aquaculture facilities are recommended for purchase whenever possible. Use of local products would both support local economies and minimize the ecological impact of product transit to UBC.

¹ *This is a SEEDS initiative. The full report is available at <http://www.sustain.ubc.ca.seeds.html>*