

## BACKGROUND

### RESTORING THE AMERICAN EEL

July 8, 2009

#### Eel Ladder Improvements at the Saunders Generating Station

- The eel ladder at the Saunders Generating Station has been extended 300 metres to return the fish to the St. Lawrence River well above the dam. The eels are swimming upstream against the current, and the addition reduces by 85 per cent the number of eels being carried back down to the dam by the current when they leave the fish ladder.
- The eel ladder has also been equipped with a new surface that allows the eels to climb the ladder faster. Short sections of plastic tube fixed at right angles to the ladder give the eels surfaces to push against as they climb and reduces their climbing time from as much as 24 hours to about two hours.
- Also installed on the eel ladder is a photoelectric counter that keeps track of the number of eels climbing the ladder. About 6,400 eels passed over the ladder in 2008.

#### Measures to Restore the American Eel

- Ontario cancelled the commercial and recreational harvest of American eels in 2004.
- The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources is working with stakeholders, Aboriginal peoples and Fisheries and Oceans Canada to develop an Ontario recovery strategy for the American eel.
- The ministry, the Province of Quebec and Fisheries and Oceans Canada are developing a management plan for American eel in Canadian waters.
- The Ministry of Natural Resources is also providing funding for projects that support the recovery of the American eel through the Species at Risk Stewardship Fund:
  - The Lanark, Ottawa, Prescott/Russell and Pembroke stewardship councils received \$47,435 to monitor American eels to better understand the downstream movement of eels, including timing of migration, mortality rates and range of distribution
  - The Ontario Waterpower Association received \$41,500 to develop a Best Management Practices Guide for Waterpower and American Eel to assist in the development and operation of hydroelectric facilities in Ontario.
  - Plenty Canada received \$103,000 to assess American Eel abundance in the Ottawa River watershed and one tributary of the Mississippi River and bring together Western Science and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge or Way of Knowing to provide guidance for the recovery of the American Eel, Lake Sturgeon and other fish species in the watershed.

#### The Importance of the American Eel

- The American eel is an important part of the diversity of life in Lake Ontario and a valuable indicator of the health of the ecosystem. As a top predator, eels help to keep other fish species in balance, including invasive species such as goby.

- Eels were abundant in the upper St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario since at least the mid-1600s. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the American eel was one of the top three species in commercial value for Ontario's fishing industry.
- In recent decades, the number of young American eels entering the upper St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario has declined dramatically. The species appears to be in decline around the globe.

### **Life Cycle of the American Eel**

- American eel are found in coastal freshwater and marine waters stretching from Greenland along the east coast of North American to northern South America. Eels are found in Ontario in the St. Lawrence River, Lake Ontario, and inland lakes and rivers.
- All American eel are part of the single breeding population that spawns in only one place in the world – the Sargasso Sea in the Atlantic Ocean. From there, young eels drift with ocean currents and then migrate inland into rivers, lakes and streams. Some eels travel as much as 6,000 kilometres over many years.
- The eels feed and mature in freshwater for 10 to 25 years before migrating back to the Sargasso Sea, where they spawn and die.

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