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Salmon will get a Judicial Inquiry

West Coast concerns over the precipitous decline in Fraser River salmon stocks have finally been recognized by the federal government. A Judicial Inquiry into the way the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) has been managing the fishery was announced on November 5. The Inquiry, under Commissioner Hon. Bruce Cohen, will begin its work early in the new year and is to provide an interim report by August 2010, and a final report by May 2011.

Salmon returns to the Fraser River this past summer were the lowest ever recorded, and as much as 90% below DFO's predictions; more than nine million salmon, predicted to return by DFO, simply failed to appear.

An SFU 'think tank' session heard from a former senior DFO scientist, Brian Riddell, that the Department had known about declining salmon stocks in the early nineties, but had continued to allow large catches from the Fraser River run.

Various reasons for the decline in stocks have been given, including climate change (warmer river temperatures and changes in ocean conditions) and sea lice infestations from salmon farms on the sockeye run's migration routes through the northern Strait of Georgia.

Meanwhile, sockeye runs in rivers to the south and north are thriving.

Dr. Riddell said he had resigned from DFO over the failure of Ottawa to take action. The think tank attracted an international group of scientists and salmon researchers—although fisheries biologists with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans were reportedly instructed by the Conservative government not to attend.

Recent reports from Norway indicate that salmon farms there are suffering devastating losses from sea lice.

Alexandra Morton is 'Hopeful'

The fight to attract the federal government's attention to the plight of Fraser River salmon has been led by biologist Alexandra Morton. She termed the Judicial Inquiry a 'significant step that could ensure wild salmon have a future.'

'There is clearly something very wrong with DFO and it would appear Mr. Harper understands the gravity of the situation. This action makes me cautiously optimistic and hopeful that we are poised at the beginning of a new era of fisheries management, benefiting all Canadians,' she said. 'Increasingly, leading fisheries scientists are suggesting DFO is

corrupt and lying,' continued Morton. 'The agency is nonfunctional, having allowed policy to override biology, carelessly risking one of earth's greatest fish stocks. The department is full of excellent scientists and enforcement officers who are not allowed to do their jobs,' she charged.

The Inquiry Focuses on Fraser Sockeye and DFO

The Terms of Reference for the Commission of Inquiry into Decline of Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River focus on Fraser River sockeye and on DFO's 'policies and practices':

(a) to conduct the Inquiry without seeking to find fault on the part of any individual, community or organization, and with the overall aim of respecting conservation of the sockeye salmon stock and encouraging broad cooperation among stakeholders,

(b) to consider the policies and practices of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (the 'Department') with respect to the sockeye salmon fishery in the Fraser River—including the Department's scientific advice, its fisheries policies and programs, its risk management strategies, its allocation of Departmental resources and its fisheries management practices and procedures, including monitoring, counting of stocks, forecasting and enforcement,

(c) to investigate and make independent findings of fact regarding:

(i) the causes for the decline of Fraser River sockeye salmon including, but not limited to, the impact of environmental changes along the Fraser River, marine environmental conditions, aquaculture, predators, diseases, water temperature and other factors that may have affected the ability of sockeye salmon to reach traditional spawning grounds or reach the ocean, and

(ii) the current state of Fraser River sockeye salmon stocks and the long term projections for those stocks, and

(d) to develop recommendations for improving the future sustainability of the sockeye salmon fishery in the Fraser River including, as required, any changes to the policies, practices and procedures of the Department in relation to the management of the Fraser River sockeye salmon fishery.

Testimony at the Inquiry will be given under oath.

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The Fisheries Act and Salmon Farms

A February 2009 BC Supreme Court judgement made it clear that management of salmon farms was no longer to be a provincial responsibility and would come under the DFO and the federal Fisheries Act. Justice Hinkson, in his decision, gave the two governments a year to effect the transfer, but Morton says that, after the summer sockeye crash, the provincial government has 'backed away', leaving DFO 'scrambling to design a regulatory regime'. In the meantime, she says, the industry is continuing to expand.

DFO has been meeting with stakeholders to discuss salmon farm regulation. The most recent meetings were in Campbell River earlier in December. To enquire about further meetings, contact Mandy Mielke (amanda.mielke@dfo-mpo.gc.ca, 613-949-3129 or Trevor Swerdfager, Director General, Aquaculture Management trevor.swerdfager@dfo-mpo.gc.ca, 613-949-4919.

Fisheries Act charges

Morton has also continued to lay charges under the Fisheries Act, both concerning the escape of farmed salmon and Marine Harvest's 'by-catch' of wild pink salmon without any license. She also said that in October 2009 Marine Harvest had admitted to catching herring in the Broughton Archipelago and composting them without a license or reporting the catch. Herring fishing in the Broughton has been closed for twenty years.

Sea Lice out of control in Norway

Norway's state broadcaster NRK reported on Monday: 'In the past year, the amount of sea lice in Norwegian fish farms exploded. The industry has been on the hump of the environmental movement in the wake of an illness boom. This is because the salmon lice infect the wild salmon, and thereby threaten wild salmon stocks.'

The Norwegian Hunters and Fishers (NJFF), Norwegian Salmon Rivers Owners (Norsk Lakseelver) and WWF Norway called on the Fisheries Minister to take the sea lice problem more seriously. NJFF reported yesterday under the headline 'A Lot of Talk - Little Action':

'...life-threatening situation for our wild salmon along the coast is informed by a disaster. The trend of increasing resistance to the main treatment methods are cause for great concern. The organizations ask that the Minister immediately initiate a standstill for further growth in the industry...We will increase the pressure in this case. The battle is now.'

The Norwegian Salmon Association reported last week under the headline 'Norway is managing the extinction of wild salmon!':

'The Director of The Directorate for Nature Management, Janne Sollie, says today that Norway is not managing the farmed salmon business, but the extinction of wild salmon! She says this due to the fact of record high and disastrous levels of sea-lice in the farmed salmon farms. If this is allowed to keep