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Reprint from Volume 23 Number 22

November 3, 2011

New wrinkle in the salmon debate ~ Sara Miles

SFU researcher Rick Routledge announced on October 18 that lab tests had positively identified a European strain of Infectious Salmon Anemia virus (ISA) in two wild sockeye salmon smolts from Rivers Inlet, BC. The tests were conducted at the Atlantic Veterinary College in Prince Edward Island, which is one of two reference labs that the World Organisation of Animal Health uses for ISA virus.

Although it poses no risk to people, 'ISA is a deadly exotic disease which could have devastating impacts on wild salmon and the many species that depend on them throughout much of British Columbia and beyond,' said Routledge. 'The combined impacts of this influenza-like virus and the recently identified parvovirus that can suppress the immune system could be particularly deadly.'

The disease could also be devastating for BC's salmon farming industry; it almost completely wiped out Chile's farmed salmon stocks a few years ago.

Dr David Groman, section head of Aquatic Diagnostic Services at the Atlantic Veterinary College, said the test results are not conclusive, but within days of the announcement, Washington and Alaska state senators had already introduced legislation for American government scientists to investigate the scope and cause of the outbreak.

When questioned in the BC Legislature, Minister of Agriculture Don McRae first focused on government protocol rather than the findings, saying that calling it a disease emergency was 'fearmongering' by the Opposition.

Federal Government Must Confirm Presence of Salmon Anemia Virus

The following day, Minister McRae had more to say: 'In Canada suspected cases of ISAV must be validated by the national aquatic health program. CFIA [Canadian Food Inspection Agency] right now are collecting the available samples from SFU. When these are collected, they will be sent to the Fisheries and Oceans national aquatic animal health laboratory in Moncton, New Brunswick for analysis.'

McRae also said that CFIA is working with the Atlantic Veterinary College to review their findings and that if ISA is validated, the CFIA will take appropriate disease control actions.

In the last several years, the Ministry of Agriculture has tested approximately 5,000 samples for ISA. They all came back negative. The majority of these tests were carried out on Atlantic salmon from BC salmon farms.

It will take about one month for DFO and CFIA to finish their investigation and for the test results to be verified.

End of Cohen Commission Hearings

Meanwhile, the *Cohen Commission of Inquiry into the Decline of Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River* is wrapping up its activities at the federal courthouse in Vancouver. Justice Cohen will hear the final oral submissions of the 21 participant groups from November 4–10. The last stage of the Inquiry will be Cohen's final report to the federal government, due June 30 next year.

More Research Needed

In biologist Alexandra Morton's report to the Commission, she claims that records from the Province of BC have reported the symptoms of Infectious Salmon Anemia many times, but have not confirmed the presence of the disease.

One thing that is clear, is that there is a dearth of data available to decision-makers. Dr Gary Marty, the BC fish health pathologist, states in his submission to the Commission that there is little comprehensive data on the health of migrating juvenile Fraser River sockeye. His recommendations include an annual comprehensive fish health survey to improve the future sustainability of the sockeye salmon fishery.

In an interview with *Island Tides*, Marty said that two-thirds of the testing done in his lab is on farmed salmon only, and that it is 'frustrating' to have so few tests done on wild fish. He also cited a lack of funds impeding DFO scientists' ability to carry out their work well.

Another document submitted to the Cohen Commission is a draft report by federal fisheries scientists showing that of 32 genetically-distinct populations of Fraser River sockeye, only four are clearly in the 'green zone', meaning they are not at risk of extinction. Despite these dismal findings, measures to protect salmon are still not in place.

The government must get on with developing recovery

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This article was published (November 3, 2011) in 'Island Tides', an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.'

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plans for populations at risk, immediately addressing threats such as overfishing, habitat destruction and open net-cage aquaculture,' said David Suzuki Foundation biologist Jeffery Young. 'Fortunately there are workable solutions to these problems, but implementing them will require strong recommendations for the Cohen Commission, and leadership from Ottawa.'

Where is the Funding?

However, on October 17, Parliament cut \$56.8 million from DFO's budget and eliminated both the *Fisheries Resource Conservation Council* and the *Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council*. These two advisory bodies gathered information from hundreds of fishers and combined it with other scientific information to guide the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans on fish stocks and quotas.

What is DFO's Role?

DFO's website it states that one of its roles is to listen to aquaculture stakeholders and act on their concerns, contributing to an informed public dialogue by providing factual information about aquaculture challenges and opportunities. However, the Green Party of Canada recently called for an overhaul of aquaculture policy, alleging that the DFO communications plan makes fish-farming sound 'environmentally-friendly and downplays science to the contrary.' 