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Reprint from Volume 25 Number 14

July 18, 2013

Lab finds virus, 'delisted' at government request

Patrick Brown

The laboratory which found segments of the Infectious Salmon Anemia virus (ISAv) in wild and farmed salmon from the BC coast had its international certification removed last month.

Dr Fred Kibenge's laboratory at the Atlantic Veterinary College of the University of Prince Edward Island, previously a 'reference laboratory' for the disease, was delisted as the result of a recommendation from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

CFIA Testing 'Inadequate'

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has been unable to detect ISAv in its salmon samples. Fish biologist Alexandra Morton says that this is because the CFIA's procedures are inadequate to detect the fast-mutating virus. Kibenge's laboratory techniques, she indicated, are more sophisticated; CFIA tests only for complete samples of the virus, which are hard to cultivate. However, CFIA has accused Kibenge's lab of publishing non-repeatable results.

CFIA had confiscated Kibenge's samples but has not published the results of any further tests that they may have carried out on them. In addition, they impounded salmon samples from SFU Professor Rick Routledge, who had also submitted material to Kibenge's lab which tested positive for ISAv.

Morton has challenged the CFIA to test the 'millions' of

Atlantic salmon in BC's fish farms; these are the fish most vulnerable to the virus. She says she first became concerned about ISAv when she read BC government reports of ISAv's 'classic lesions' on BC's farmed Atlantic salmon.

Decision Leaves Only One Test Facility

Dr Kibenge was subpoenaed to describe his findings at the 2012 Cohen Commission, which investigated the decline of Fraser River salmon runs. His was not the only lab to detect ISAv in BC salmon; three Canadian government labs and one at the University of Bergen, Norway found positive test results.

At the same hearings, environmental lawyer Greg McDade suggested that the CFIA would attempt to damage Kibenge's credibility. Maybe he was right. A few months later, CFIA carried out an audit of the UPEI laboratory, followed quickly by another audit, which has remained unpublished.

Then, in November 2012, the CFIA recommended to the Office of International Epizootics (OIE) that Kibenge's lab be 'delisted' as a reference laboratory for ISAv. In June 2013, the 178 member countries of the OIE voted unanimously to accept the recommendation.

This leaves the CFIA as the only organization which could certify the existence of ISAv in any Canadian fish. Certainly, CFIA's action will discourage any lab that might suspect ISAv from reporting its findings. ☞

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'This article was published (July 18, 2013) in 'Island Tides', an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.'

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