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Conflict grows between fish farms and First Nations -

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Photo: Alexandra Morton

Hereditary leaders Joe Willie and Willie Moon hand an eviction notice to a Cermaq salmon farmer employee.

Conflict is growing between Cermaq Canada salmon farms and the Musgamagw Dzawada'enuxw and Ahousaht First Nations.

With the Sea Shephard Conservation Society's vessel the *Martin Sheen* making a virus-hunting research tour of the salmon farms on the BC coast, fish farms have been thrown into the spotlight. Since then, First Nation groups have boarded multiple farms to hand out eviction notices, and the RCMP has made four arrests of First Nation protestors.

Eviction Notices Handed to Farms

On August 18 and 19, Musgamagw Dzawada'enuxw First

Nations boarded four Cermaq Canada fish farms to give them eviction notices. First Nations say the fish farms are operating on their traditional, unceded territory without their consent and with their active opposition. Hereditary chiefs have also issued eviction notices to the other 23 fish farms within their territory.

The Musgamagw Dzawada'enuxw, which consists of five nations with 576 members, and whose territory encompasses the Broughton Archipelago east of Alert Bay, say that their aim is to cleanse the waters for their children and grandchildren.

In a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the First Nations said that 'We, the Musgamagw Dzawada'enuxw, view

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the destruction of wild fish by the fish farming industry as part of the long history of genocide forced on our people by the governments of Canada. Salmon are essential to our well-being and the well-being of our world.'

Cermaq Canada farms had previously complained of harassment from the Sea Shephard Society's research vessel, which was studying their farms without their permission. While the company originally said they were willing to meet with the First Nations to discuss the issue, they also said it was disconcerting to be boarded by the First Nations without warning.

'Imagine if 30 people came to your workplace when there are four or five of you in the middle of the ocean. It is challenging,' said Jeremy Dunn, the executive director of the BC Salmon Farmers Association.

Four Arrests Made

Events escalated on August 22, just days after the eviction notices were delivered, at the Dixon Bay Cermaq fish farm near Tofino. Four Ahousaht First Nation activists who are part of an activism group called the Yaaskwiis Warriors were arrested by RCMP following a peaceful protest against the fish farm. The four were released from custody the next day.

The Yaaskwiis Warriors were arrested while attempting to stop Cermaq employees from restocking an empty feedlot with young Atlantic salmon. Lennie John, Sacheen Seitcham, Joe James Rampanen and Havanna Couture arrived at the pens being restocked in John's 20-foot aluminum boat. They approached, radioed at the employees of Cermaq to stop, and then boarded the farm when the employees refused their request. Cermaq staff called the police. According to John, he and his fellow activists left shortly after. They were arrested the shortly afterwards for alleged mischief and intimidation.

Cermaq's Dixon Bay Farm

The Dixon Bay fish farm is the same one that was shut down in

2012 due to an outbreak of an infectious virus known as IHNV, or infectious hematopoietic necrosis virus. The virus is one that is carried by wild fish without seeming to affect them, but that can wipe out 90% of a fish farm.

This wasn't the first time the Yaaskwiis Warriors have protested against Cermaq fish farms. In September of 2015, the group led a nine-day protest against the company that ended up stopping Cermaq from anchoring a new fish farm at Yaaskwiis Bay.

Disputed Agreements

While many First Nations are protesting the fish farms and demanding that the companies leave their territory, others support the farms. According to Dunn, the salmon farms in the area have a two-decade history of working with the local First Nations and have 20 social and economic agreements with BC First Nation bands. Those agreements, Dunn said, cover 78% of BC.

Some of the elected leaders of the Ahousaht First Nations have given their support to the Cermaq farms. Yet the Yaaskwiis Warriors say this stance doesn't represent them. 'We, the Ahousaht people, have not been consulted and have not consented to the presence of Cermaq on our territories,' the group said in a statement. 'Any agreements that have been made or signed without our consent between Cermaq and any organizations claiming to represent us are not valid and we do not recognize. We will continue our defence of our food sources, our lands and waters and our future generations.'

The statement goes on to read, 'The RCMP should not be interfering in these matters. By doing so, it is clear that they have overstepped their role by acting as enforcers for corporations against and in violation of the clear rights we have as members of the Ahousaht Nation to our territories.'

So far, no charges have been laid on the four activists, but the matter has been referred to the crown. ✍