

NEWS RELEASE

Pink salmon collapse unprecedented, say fisheries department scientists

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VANCOUVER - An unprecedented collapse of pink salmon stocks off the northeast coast of Vancouver Island did not occur by chance or an act of God, and was the result of a dramatic impact on the near-shore marine environment, federal scientists have confirmed.

This summer's pink collapse in the Broughton Archipelago, particularly in Bond and Knight inlets, was the worst in magnitude and scope ever seen on the British Columbia coast since the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) began record keeping in 1953, department scientists recently told representatives of conservation groups, First Nations, salmon farms, universities and the provincial government.

Biologist Alexandra Morton, who lives in the Broughton Archipelago, first raised concern about an explosion of sea lice on pink salmon smolts in the summer of 2001. She continued her research this past summer working with other scientists and found that where salmon farms were located on salmon migratory routes the incidence of sea lice soared.

"Now finally, some logical analysis is coming from DFO when in the summer of 2001 other department scientists dismissed my findings and concerns without adequately researching what was happening," said Ms. Morton who has lived on Gilford Island, adjacent to Port McNeil, for 18 years.

"Until now, whenever anyone suggested that an increase in diseases, like sea lice or salmon anemia, might be connected to the fact that salmon farms are located in prime wild salmon habitat, DFO scientists from the Pacific Biological Station refused to consider the possibility so this report from Dr. Blair Holtby is a very welcome change," she said.

While Dr. Holtby has not researched the possible cause of this year's devastating collapse of pink salmon, he made it clear it was not due to any factors in the open ocean or fresh water, says Otto Langer, director of the David Suzuki Foundation's marine conservation program, who attended the Oct. 28 meeting in Campbell River.

"We were told of 1000-fold declines in pink salmon numbers and the evidence we saw, plus European experience with lice outbreaks, points to a probable link to salmon farms," said Mr. Langer.

Similar scenarios have occurred in other countries like Scotland, Ireland and Norway where salmon farms - floating feedlots - and wild salmon share the marine environment.

Scottish scientists recently presented evidence showing the closest link yet between high sea lice levels on salmon farms and high levels of the parasites close to the mouth of a trout river.

In Alaska, where salmon farms are banned no such problems have been found.

"I have contacted Dr. Bill Heard, who is the top pink salmon expert in Alaska, to ask if scientists there had ever seen salmon lice on juvenile pink salmon and he simply said 'no'," Ms. Morton said.

First Nations say the major pink salmon run in their traditional territory has been devastated.

"We believe that the sea lice from the salmon farms are the cause of this," said Chief Bill Cranmer of the Musgamagw Tsawataineuk Tribal Council. "Independent studies suggest this is the cause of this collapse, and this is the first time we've heard anyone from DFO take our concerns seriously. Now we want DFO to find out what really is happening here."

While ongoing monitoring is needed to evaluate the incidence of disease outbreaks, immediate action is urgently needed because the stage is set for this to happen again when the young pink salmon go to sea in April, said Chief Cranmer.

Dr. Craig Orr of Simon Fraser University's Centre for Coastal Studies also attended the meeting and says: "The evidence presented at this meeting highlighted the importance of addressing the sea lice issue head on."

Salmon farmers should no longer be allowed to put floating net pens directly in migratory passages where salmon pass from the ocean to their natal rivers and streams, say these spokespeople for the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform (CAAR).

"The Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the office of the federal aquaculture commissioner should begin work to examine alternatives to net-cage technology so that we don't have waste and escaped fish from these farms entering the marine environment," said Ms. Morton.

CAAR is a coalition of conservation and First Nations groups working to protect the ocean and humans from the dangers of farmed salmon. For more information, please visit www.farmedanddangerous.org.

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