

NEWS RELEASE

Fish farming expansion in BC for halibut and sablefish approved behind closed doors

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VANCOUVER - Without any public consultation or notification to coastal communities, the provincial and federal fisheries ministries have quietly approved 47 licences to existing fish farming companies to expand their operations to raise new species - halibut and sablefish (black cod), the David Suzuki Foundation and the Canadian Sablefish Association have learned.

This marks the first time these species will be farmed in BC waters.

Most of the licences have been issued to companies that already farm salmon and a few to shellfish farmers. There are seven licences for halibut, 22 for sablefish and 18 applications from salmon farms that want to add sablefish to their existing licences, says information contained in a memo from John Cummins, Member of Parliament for Delta-Richmond South.

“Given the huge number of environmental problems with existing salmon farms, it is absolutely outrageous that the provincial and federal governments are expanding net-cage fish farming in the ocean to include halibut and sablefish,” said Otto Langer, director of marine conservation for the David Suzuki Foundation.

“And what is even more outrageous is that no one was consulted about this expansion. Not First Nations, not coastal communities that share the water with these farms, and not fishing or environmental groups,” he added.

Many of the fish farms that currently stock or plan to stock sablefish are located near inlets where wild juvenile sablefish spend their first three years before going out to sea. Yet no studies have been conducted to assess the possible effects of huge amounts of farmed sablefish sharing the water with wild juvenile fish, said Eric Wickham of the Canadian Sablefish Association.

“It is insane to start farming new species the same way we did with salmon over 15 years ago with virtually no scientific information. Have we learned nothing?” Mr. Wickham asked. “We know absolutely nothing about how putting large amounts of farmed sablefish in the same marine environment or how escaped farmed fish will affect wild sablefish. And based on the salmon farming experience we know fish will escape from floating net cages.”

Another issue is the fact that in the wild, salmon, halibut and sablefish never school together. By farming them side-by-side and introducing farmed halibut and sablefish into

areas where salmon migrate, we are creating an abnormal situation that may cause the transfer of diseases and parasites back and forth between species, said Mr. Wickham.

“Our governments are risking the whole wild sablefish and Pacific halibut stocks in Canada and Alaska by jumping blindly into farming these species,” he said. “At the very least, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans should have conducted an environmental assessment before approving licences to farm new fish species when so many environmental and fish health issues have emerged because of salmon farming.”

Like salmon, sablefish and halibut are carnivores and their diet consists of smaller fish. Feed for farmed fish is made from species like mackerel and anchovy, which are good sources of protein and a staple in some developing countries. Making fish feed from these species results in a ‘net loss’ of protein from the ocean as it takes between three to five kilograms of wild fish to produce one kilogram of farmed. This leads to a depletion of wild fish stocks and is a poor use of valuable protein.

“It is incredible that our governments would put at risk two very successful fisheries that are extremely well managed and that contribute jobs and wealth to this province,” said Mr. Wickham. “What is even more incredible to the people who work in these fisheries, however, is that this is being done without any consultation. We haven’t even had the courtesy of a phone call.”

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