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Broadcast: February 4, 2003

Farm fish are perfect hosts for parasites. For sea lice, a farm is a big crowded party, an all-you-can-eat buffet. The louse is not invited, but it latches on, breeds and multiplies.



Department of Fisheries and Oceans research fish farm, at the DFO's Pacific Biological Station.

On the surface the industry looks benign. But invisible underneath, there can be epidemics of fish disease and open sewers of fish feces.

No one knows for sure how the farms might impact the wild salmon that migrate through the bays and inlets past a gauntlet of them. That's why, in Alaska, salmon farms are banned. But not in British Columbia.

Chris Bennett makes a living helping tourists hook fish in the Broughton Archipelago. Two summers ago, Chris saw hundreds of baby pink salmon struggling to swim the inlet. They were being eaten alive by lice: "with lice all over their sides, and bleeding around the edges." Bennett says the lice had "eaten right through the mucous and the scales" of some of the fish. Bennett collected some samples and brought them to Alexandra Morton, a biologist: "Chris's emotions are all over his face and he looked so worried. He brought me these two little fish..."



The sea louse latches onto the fish, breeds and multiplies.

Morton knew from European research that sea lice and salmon farms go together, like dinner and desert. She hit the water, dipping up baby pink salmon, and examining them for lice.

"It was a very desperate period of time," she recalls, "because everywhere I went these little fish were wrecked. They were bleeding from their eyes and their fins. They were not going to survive and there was thousands and thousands and thousands."



Morton was convinced there was a link between the fish farms and the problems with the wild fish: "When I went to a place where the fish had come from the river and not past a fish

farm, they were fine. And then when I got closer to the fish farms you could see the lice numbers just exploded.”

Farm fish are perfect hosts for parasites. For sea lice, a farm is a big crowded party, an all-you-can-eat buffet. The louse is not invited, but it latches on, breeds and multiplies.

“Every single coastline that had salmon aquaculture [has] had big problems with their wild fish due to sea lice coming from the salmon farms,” says Morton.

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Broadcast: February 4, 2003

In the summer of 2001, biologist Alexandra Morton was blaming salmon farms for a sea lice epidemic that she predicted would decimate the pink salmon run. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans conducted a study that concluded otherwise. Disclosure has obtained government documents that reveal DFO knew that its study of the problem was seriously flawed.



The sea louse latches onto the fish, breeds and multiplies.

Alexandra Morton is a biologist who lives in the Broughton, a small cluster of islands on the Pacific Coast. In the summer of 2001, a friend of Alexandra's brought her some fish infected with sea lice. Morton began sampling fish and found "thousands and thousands" more infected with lice.

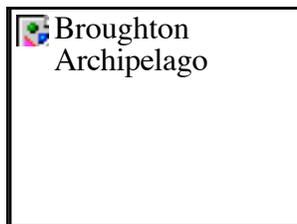
She alerted the people whose job is to protect wild salmon: the Federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans. It sent a boat to investigate the sea lice reports, but found nothing unusual. A report was issued and the case was closed.

Dr. Don Noakes of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans was in charge. "In general, there were low levels of sea lice on the pink salmon that we surveyed," he says.

But local fisherman Billy Proctor didn't buy it. "You could go anywhere and dip up a bucketful of fry with a little dip net," he says with a laugh. "Dippin' blind you'd get a bucketful and D.F.O. couldn't find anything."

"When you see the babies dying all along the beach by the millions with lice all over them, it's pretty well written there what's happening when they're dying like that."

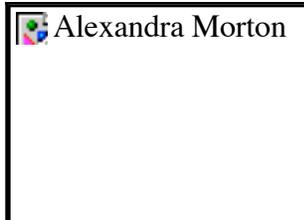
When asked how the scientists could get it so wrong, Proctor shakes his head. "Well, I don't know... They're not giving us the truth that's what I think. I think they know but they don't want to rock the boat."



The Broughton Archipelago.

"I'm a scientist and I don't buy what they're saying," says Neil Frazer, a Professor of Theoretical Geophysics with a keen interest in fisheries science. "I think it's wrong, I think it's unscientific. I think it's untrue."

Frazer believes the Department of Fisheries and Oceans is in too deep with industry: "I think the word came down from someplace. There will be salmon aquaculture and you guys are gonna make it happen quickly."



Alexandra Morton was blaming salmon farms for a sea lice epidemic that she predicted would decimate the pink salmon run.

The fish farm companies have found friendly waters in Nanaimo, at Pacific Biological Station, DFO's west coast lab. Here, in a government agency that's supposed to protect wild fish, there's a Division of Aquaculture that's actively fostering the industry.

Most of the division's research is geared to helping fish farmers grow a bigger, better product. And guess who's here? Dr. Noakes, the man who didn't find any sea lice on wild Pacific Salmon. In fact, it turns out Dr.

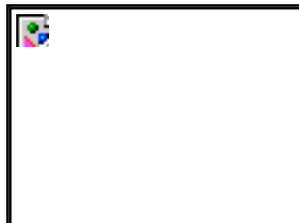
Noakes is actually the head of the Aquaculture Division.

"Here are these little wild fish coming down the inlets," says Neil Frazer. "And who's investigating the sea lice on them? The head of Aquaculture.

"Investigations should not be conducted by any party that might be potentially embarrassed by the results of the investigation," says Frazer. "And that is why when a tobacco company scientist tells us that tobacco isn't harmful, we should take that with a grain of salt."

What was really being protected in the Broughton in the summer of 2001? Alexandra Morton was blaming salmon farms for a sea lice epidemic that she predicted would decimate the pink salmon run.

So how come DFO didn't find any lousy fish? *Disclosure* has obtained government documents that reveal DFO knew that its study of the problem was seriously flawed.



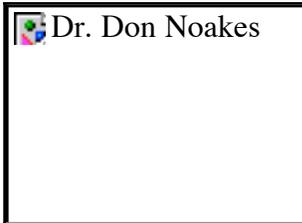
Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Pacific Biological Station.

Pacific Biological Station was alerted on June 7, 2001. An internal email shows that by mid-month DFO knew that fish farms in the Broughton were quietly reporting "high lice

numbers”.

At the end of June, Dr. Noakes sent in a trawler. It caught about a hundred pink salmon, and pronounced them healthy and louse-free.

But the boat’s location was fishy. The boat made its catch way out in Queen Charlotte Strait, not inside the Broughton, where most of the fish farms are located.



Dr. Don Noakes of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Billy Proctor watched the whole exercise with disgust. “DFO come up and done a study and they never went near the problem area,” he says.

“They got here three weeks late and never went near the shore where the pink salmon fry always follow the shore.”

There was a second big snag in the survey, and Dr. Noakes knew it. His own expert had warned the trawl sample “potentially, severely underestimates the louse numbers.”

That’s because the trawl nets had scraped the scales right off the fish, and maybe the evidence too.

DISCLOSURE: The parasitologist, he went on to say: “Had these fish been caught in a scientifically sound manner, I would call this a normal parasite load. But given the method that was used, I won’t say anything.”

DR. NOAKES: Uh, yeah, I can’t comment on that. I don’t know that comment in particular.

DISCLOSURE: This comes from Whitaker.

DR. NOAKES: Well okay, that’s fine. That’s why we used the two kinds of gear.

A second boat, a Seiner, was quietly sent into the Broughton to take more samples.

DISCLOSURE: We’re already three weeks after the fact with boat number one, now we’re boat number two. How late after the alarm was sounded are you now sampling for these fish?

DR. NOAKES: If we were notified in early June we’re probably five weeks after the fact...

DISCLOSURE: Wouldn’t they be dead and gone by



A second boat was quietly sent into the Broughton to take more samples.

the time you arrived?

DR. NOAKES: No, I think by the end of June there'll still be fish, there'll still be fish in the area...

But it wasn't June, it was July. And there weren't. Buried within DFO's final report, a report that was released six months later, is one astonishing number:

DISCLOSURE: You only caught seven fish in the Broughton itself.

DR. NOAKES: The way the seine gear sampling was done, I mean it wasn't the seine gear was not...

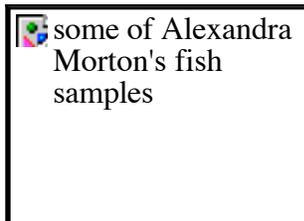
DISCLOSURE: You've gone out and made continuous reassuring statements that said there's no problem here. You're saying that based on seven fish that you caught?

DR. NOAKES: No, we're not basing it on the seven fish. We're basing it on the kind of loads that we saw in terms of sea lice and with respect to our trawl gear...

DISCLOSURE: But the trawl gear methodology was problematic.

DR. NOAKES: The trawl gear methodology – I mean obviously it removes scales and that was an issue we did try and look at in the overall report.

As for Alexandra Morton's results, Dr. Noakes dismisses them: "We know that salmon are distributed vertically in the water column and you can't simply use a dip net to get a representative sample of the population."



"They came after me six weeks later and said 'We're going to investigate you for fishing for these small fish without a license,'" says Morton.

"I out-fished DFO with a dip net," says Morton. "If you can't catch them, these things are still in the freezer. Come and have a look. They did not want to look. They did not want to know, they did not want to see the problem."

And it didn't end there. "Then they came after me six weeks later and said 'We're going to investigate you for fishing for these small fish without a license,'" says Morton.

Neil Frazer was threatened too. His sharp critique of Dr. Noakes and his sea lice study was published in a fishing magazine. And he got mail from Noakes' lawyer.

DISCLOSURE: Did you feel that you were being shut down? That there was an attempt to silence you in any way?

FRAZER: Oh, of course.

Frazer says he's still speaking his mind because scientists who work for DFO can't:

FRAZER: These people are afraid. And I think they have very good reason to be afraid.

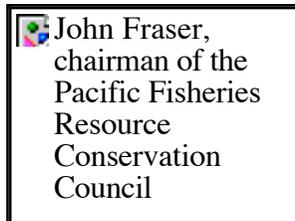
DISCLOSURE: Afraid of what?

FRAZER: I think they all know that if they made a public statement against salmon farming their career is going to come to a halt... There's nothing they can do, they just have to wait for some catastrophe.

The catastrophe came last fall. Millions of pink salmon, 99 per cent of the run, did not return to the Broughton. It was the biggest salmon collapse this coast has ever seen. DFO says it doesn't know how or why it happened – but sea lice are at the bottom of its list.

"DFO, they're telling us fairy tales," says Morton. "They know. They know perfectly well that the sea lice are the problem. And they should have been watching for this."

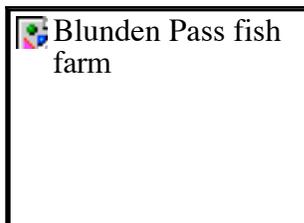
Maybe no one was watching, but someone with clout was listening – and siding with Alexandra Morton. The Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council is an independent salmon watchdog, appointed by Ottawa to tell British Columbians and fisheries ministers the truth about the state of Pacific Salmon stocks.



John Fraser, chairman of the the Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council.

"We can't find any other reason for the dramatic decline," says the council's chairman, John Fraser. He's a former Conservative Fisheries minister – not your typical tree-hugger.

"Alexandra Morton is a trained biologist," says Fraser. "She shouldn't have had to go out there and do this. The governments that we elect and the agencies that the governments establish should have been on top of this. And let's be very frank about this: they weren't."



The Blunden Pass fish farm.

The Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council has urged that every salmon farm in the Broughton be emptied of fish, this month, so the few remaining wild pinks have safe passage to sea. But at the same time, the B.C. government has lifted a cap on salmon farm expansion and pronounced its coast wide-open for business. Alexandra is watching and waiting.

She takes us to the Blunden Pass fish farm, where she says they just started dumping new Atlantic smolts into the water. No one is stopping them.

DISCLOSURE: We saw them restocking some of these farms.

DR. NOAKES: Yes.

DISCLOSURE: Does that concern you – that they're restocking in areas that perhaps should be emptied?

DR. NOAKES: I mean they have every legal right to restock the farms. And...

DISCLOSURE: And you have a legal right to protect the wild salmon stocks.

DR. NOAKES: Well, under the Fisheries Act we don't have the right to order them to get rid of those fish.

DISCLOSURE: Who can?

DR. NOAKES: Uh, I mean, it, prob—

DISCLOSURE: Who can say that these, these farms could be endangering the wild salmon population?

DR. NOAKES: We—

DISCLOSURE: Get them out. Who can do that?

DR. NOAKES: At this point in time the evidence is not, is simply not strong enough to warrant that kind of a strong recommendation.

"This is like the Northern Cod all over again, on a slightly smaller scale," says Neil Frazer. "When you mix scientists and politicians the politicians win every time."

For Billy Proctor, it's not rocket science: "Big money talks. Simple as that."

Footnote: On February 6, 2003, the BC government ordered the temporary closure of nearly half the fish farms in the Broughton Archipelago off northern Vancouver Island, to protect wild salmon stocks. See the [press release](#) [PDF].

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Broadcast: February 4, 2003

Salmon: a star attraction on any dinner plate. And in British Columbia, salmon is a savoury saviour for the province's economy. It's got all the right ingredients: a rich sustainable supply and delicious demand from hungry consumers. At least that's the way the B.C. government sees farmed salmon. And that's an image it is prepared to go to great lengths to promote and protect.

More than 100 floating salmon farms mark British Columbia's pristine coast. Beneath the surface, millions of farm-fattened fish are grown in net pens, and then shipped out to be broiled, baked or barbecued. It's B.C.'s biggest agricultural export.

But the irony is this product of the Pacific is actually an Atlantic Salmon. And it's not Canadian companies, but mostly foreign multinationals farming these waters. Twenty years ago Norwegian companies began bringing their fish –and their farms–to the B.C. coast.

"The Norwegian government warned us," says Jim Fulton, executive director of the Suzuki Foundation. "They said this is the biggest environmental problem we've ever had."

Fulton recalls what a Norwegian MP told a Canadian government committee: "They warned us and said 'Look you guys, wake up, these guys who won't live by our laws here in Norway, they're coming to Canada.'"

But B.C. didn't heed the warning. Far from it: instead, it opened its coast to the fish farms. In the fall of 2002 after a seven-year freeze on new licenses, the new liberal government and Fisheries Minister John van Dongen proudly announced that B.C. was back in the business.

B.C. provided safe haven for the fish farms, and the fish farms flourished. But then something went wrong. The fish didn't follow the script. Two and a half years ago, on a farm near Vancouver Island, more than 30,000 Atlantic salmon escaped through a tear in their net pen.

These foreign fish are seen as a threat to the fragile Pacific salmon stocks. Releasing them into the wild would see companies slapped with a fine.

The salmon escaped from a farm owned by Stolt-Neilsen, a Norwegian conglomerate- and with 30 farms - the biggest player on the Pacific Coast. British Columbia's ministry of fisheries was called in. It knew the company well - this was Stolt's second major escape in the past year. The ministry decided not to lay charges. Case closed.

The salmon -and its public image- were safe. But Stolt wasn't off the hook. A different provincial ministry wanted heads to roll.

This started a storm of controversy - we know, because we obtained internal government documents. The documents show that the ministry responsible for the environment was going after Stolt. They wanted charges. That made waves with the fisheries ministry and the minister himself - John van Dongen.

"I think the feeling was everything was being kept under wraps here," says Mike Romaine of [Public Service Employees for Environmental Ethics](#). Romaine is not on the inside, but he speaks for people who are -whistleblowers that want to talk but can't because of government gag orders.

DISCLOSURE: Why this secrecy? Why the veil of secrecy?

ROMAINE: Well, that's a concern to everyone, but it appears that people see that this is against government policy if you speak out on issues that are of an environmental or ethical matter.

People weren't speaking publicly, but the paper trail shows they were having words at the highest levels of government.

We know Stolt wanted the investigation stopped - no surprise there. But even the government thought it was a bad idea. An email from the investigator into the Stolt escape shows the minister's office is involved in an ongoing investigation and that's crossing the line.

The email reads: "...a great deal of discussion is continuing at John van Dongen's level regarding the follow-up investigation we initiated..."

-  [view the email](#) [PDF].

"A company like Stolt has huge clout," says Jim Fulton. "When they call and want to go to the premier's office or the minister's office... they're in and they're in at the top. They don't deal with bureaucrats, they don't deal with enforcement."

So it's no surprise what happened next.

Stolt's vice president fired off a [stern letter](#) to the ministers. Angry with what he called a "strident officer" and surprised the government would even pursue the matter, he referred to a meetings with van Dongen and other ministers – a meeting he thought was supposed to "repair and rebuild" troubled relationships.

-  [view the letter](#) [PDF].

"They've got the provincial government and the federal government in their hip pocket." That's the way local Alliance MP John Cummins sees it. He's a critic of the fish farms, and that's a tough position to take in British Columbia.

"The industry is powerful," says Cummins. "It's wealthy. It does not tolerate criticism... Even a call for regulations is an attack on it."

The environment ministry recommended Stolt be charged. Then the investigator himself gets a call from Stolt's vice president. What was said in that conversation is now the subject of an RCMP probe. What is clear though, is that someone inside the government had leaked confidential details of the case to Stolt.

"I think it really reflects where government appears to be going right now," says Mike Romaine. "...It's economic development at the expense of everything... and everything else that stands in its way should be pushed aside so that we can move forward."

But the Fisheries ministry still had a mess on its hands. The fish farms are controversial and the environment ministry's charges wouldn't help, so Bud Graham –the point man on fish farms for the fisheries ministry– attacked the charges, writing that he wasn't sure how this course of action meets "public's interest."

Graham's confidential briefing note, prepared for Minister van Dongen, reaffirmed what was important to the government: the salmon market was on the line, the big one that couldn't get away.

In his note, Graham wrote that the fish farms and their potential expansion were a "key ministerial priority" and the charges were sending "conflicting messages" to industry and could even affect "public perceptions."

-  [view Graham's briefing note](#) [PDF].

"There's a conflict just inherent in that," says Alliance MP John Cummins. "A department charged with regulations cannot also be responsible for promotion and we see that in these documents."

The environment ministry drops the case. Department managers wrote: "The investigation has been significantly compromised" ... "Justice has not been served in this matter."

-  [view the email exchange](#) in which the above-mentioned statements were made [PDF].

The investigation was dropped, the public would never know. Once again, the salmon were safe –if not for the paper trail. Before these documents were released to us, government lawyers reviewed them. A special prosecutor was named – and the RCMP commercial crimes unit opened its own investigation.

The Fisheries Minister was forced to step aside. Sources have told CBC that van Dongen himself compromised the Stolt investigation by tipping off the company.

"The ministry and the government are clearly guilty of not applying the law in a straight forward way to Stolt in this case," says Jim Fulton. "That opens the question: is it occurring to other companies or just to Stolt? Because in order for justice to be seen to be working it has to be applying equally to everyone."

But *Disclosure* has learned the story doesn't end with van Dongen, the Fisheries Minister who stepped aside. A confidential memo shows his replacement, Minister Stan Hagen, is involved too. It also shows van Dongen and Hagen wanted the Stolt investigation to go all the way to the Premier's Office.

-  [view the memo](#) [PDF].

"I'm disturbed by what I see here," say John Cummins. "It's inappropriate interference in an investigation by the Minister and the fact that this would have been brought to the attention of the Premier is again disturbing."

Did the Stolt file make it all the way to the Premier's office? We tracked down premier Gordon Campbell and asked him:

DISCLOSURE: We're just trying to confirm a very simple question - whether a document that was prepared ever made it to your office... a briefing document here.

CAMPBELL: Sorry, I don't know anything about it. I mean, I don't know the document, I haven't seen it before. So if you have specific questions I'm glad to answer them and I'll get them to you—

DISCLOSURE: This is the specific question. It's this document here.

CAMPBELL: I've never seen that document, no.

DISCLOSURE: It was recommended here that it be brought to Ken Dobell in your office.

CAMPBELL: I have not seen it, no.

DISCLOSURE: You've never seen this? It's never been brought to your attention?

CAMPBELL: No.

None of the people directly involved in this story, including Stolt Fish Farms, are talking because of the ongoing RCMP investigation.

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