

WHY B.C. LIFTED THE MORATORIUM ON FISH FARMS

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Fish farming in British Columbia is a responsible and environmentally sustainable industry. This is the conclusion from leading marine scientists with the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the provincial government, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and academic institutions.

Despite these findings, there has been recent controversy over salmon aquaculture in B.C. I want to allay fears, dispel myths and set the record straight about our province's well-managed and highly regulated industry.

Our government's decision to lift the moratorium on salmon farm expansion was made after a full five years of research and consultation with all stakeholders – scientists, environmentalists, industry, First Nations and local communities.

The moratorium had been in place since 1995, when a two-year comprehensive study of the salmon aquaculture industry was undertaken. As a result of the Salmon Aquaculture Review, the Environmental Assessment Office recommended proceeding, but with caution. We've done that, and have moved very slowly in allowing farms to expand. We've tightened escape regulations, introduced waste-discharge standards and demanded that each farm develop and comply with a management plan.

All of us treasure our West Coast environment, and we all value the long-term sustainability of our wild fish stocks. No scientist will uncover evidence of harm to the ocean environment or the existing wild fish stock, and then conceal that truth. And rest assured no elected official will support policy leading to the consequences predicted by the anti-expansion lobby.

The following are the facts about the claims made by those opposed to fish farm expansion.

“Fish farms are havens for massive outbreaks of disease.”

In fact, there is no recorded instance in B.C. of bacterial or viral disease moving from farmed salmon to wild stocks. Diseases like IHN are a threat to production but pose a very low risk to wild stocks and absolutely no risk to human health. As well, all smolts put into fish farms are inspected to be free from the virus.

“Atlantic salmon escape and have been demonstrated to spawn in our rivers, thus displacing native species.”

The reality is that from 1905 to 1935, more than 8.6 million Atlantic salmon of various ages were intentionally introduced into more than 60 B.C. lakes and streams to establish an Atlantic

salmon fishery, but even though a few mature sea-run Atlantics were captured in the Cowichan River, a self-sustaining population failed to materialize.

Recent environmental assessments by the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and B.C.'s Environmental Assessment Office conclude the risk of Atlantic salmon colonization in the Pacific Northwest is low.

Recent studies indicate Atlantic salmon have spawned in B.C. waters and their progeny can survive. But their presence simply confirms what's been known since the early 1900s – Atlantic salmon are capable of producing offspring in the wild, but self-sustaining exotic populations of Atlantic salmon have not materialized anywhere in the world.

“Farms produce massive numbers of sea lice that kill migrating wild salmon smolts and attack adults when they return to spawn.”

Wild salmon populations are very volatile, and dramatic changes in abundance occur naturally. There are natural cycles of sea lice in wild stocks. Fish farmers do not want lice-laden fish, so they address any instances of sea lice immediately. Fish farmers do not let sea lice accumulate on their fish – it's not good business. If an outbreak occurs, their fish veterinarians can take steps to eradicate it. Farmed fish are under constant scrutiny to ensure high health standards.

“The pink salmon stock in the Broughton Archipelago on northern Vancouver Island is collapsing, and it must be due to a sea lice infestation last summer.”

Fisheries and Oceans Canada is the organization best equipped to judge the status of fish returns. It considers this report a theory that is not backed up by complete data. Fisheries and Oceans is still compiling accurate numbers about how many pink salmon have returned this year, including in the Broughton Archipelago. Where they have data for other species, Fisheries and Oceans reports returns are good and above predictions – including in areas where there are salmon farms.

Last year, higher levels of sea lice were reported on pink salmon juveniles in the Broughton Archipelago. Fisheries and Oceans investigated at that time and concluded that there was no correlation to salmon farms and that juvenile pink salmon were in good condition.

It is speculation at best that there are low numbers in the run this year. If it is determined there is a reduced run, there are a number of possible causes, all of which will be investigated. Therefore, it would be irresponsible to assume at this time that there is any correlation of pink salmon returns to sea lice.

“Farms deposit raw sewage on the ocean floor.”

For the most part, fish farm waste is no different than the waste from a school of wild fish.

Concentrations can be higher and in some cases can result in waste build-up on the ocean floor if the farm is not properly managed or properly sited, but the new waste regulations ensure the production of waste does not exceed the site's ability to assimilate it. A large scientific database shows the conditions on the sea bottom at many farm sites are only moderately affected, and almost all sites recover to their original state within 18 months.

“Farmed salmon, because of the way they are reared and the antibiotics they are fed, are unhealthy to consume.”

Only limited amounts of antibiotics are used, and always under the supervision of a veterinarian. The quantity of antibiotics is declining because of good fish health practices. Most antibiotic treatments are done in salmon’s early life to address bacterial infections, long before the fish are harvested. The fish are processed in modern, clean processing plants inspected by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Salmon aquaculture is a safe and environmentally responsible industry, with tremendous economic potential for coastal British Columbia. Independent studies suggest controlled expansion could generate over \$1 billion in economic activity over the next 10 years.

B.C.’s fish farmers cannot afford to produce a substandard product. It is in their own financial interest to make sure they raise healthy fish in a healthy environment.

British Columbia has the most comprehensive regulatory framework for salmon aquaculture in the world. The best available science clearly states the industry is sustainable, and on that scientific basis we have moved to allow expansion of the industry. With that expansion there will be continued close monitoring of the industry. Preservation of the environment and wild fish stock will never be sacrificed.

Visit the province's Web site at <http://www.gov.bc.ca/> for online information and services.