

Activists, salmon farmers work together

Groups co-operate on pilot project using closed-containment system

BY CLARE BACKMAN AND JENNIFER LASH, SPECIAL TO TIMES COLONIST FEBRUARY 4, 2010

Today's problems cannot be solved if we still think the way we thought when we created them. -- Albert Einstein

One has to be forward thinking, open-minded and innovative to develop truly sustainable ways of managing natural resources and people's interaction with nature.

This is true for most everything we do in the world and it's also true when it comes to salmon farming.

In the midst of the debate over salmon farming on British Columbia's coast, the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform, which includes the Living Oceans Society, David Suzuki Foundation, Watershed Watch, T. Buck Suzuki Foundation, Georgia Strait Alliance and Marine Harvest Canada, a division of the largest salmon farming company in the world, have been working together to find a path forward.

Together the alliance and Marine Harvest decided to focus efforts in two important areas:

First, to test the environmental and economic sustainability of closed containment technology.

Second, to use improved farm and area-based management to reduce the likelihood that farmed salmon would infect out-migrating juvenile salmon with sea lice in the Broughton Archipelago.

To this end, Marine Harvest plans to design and secure funding for a commercial-scale closed-containment pilot project early in 2010.

This project will be carried out in association with the alliance.

A detailed work plan for the project is under development, including timelines for design, technical due diligence and finalizing an economic model to evaluate the sustainability performance of closed containment technology.

The work plan is scheduled for completion the end of March with a public announcement to follow shortly thereafter.

The closed containment pilots -- a vital component of the initiative -- will provide data essential to answer questions related to a transition from conventional ways of farming salmon.

While closed containment technology is already being used to grow salmon and trout in Washington state, China, and Norway -- and by Marine Harvest to raise smolts -- questions remain about the viability of commercial-scale application of the technology for raising salmon to market.

The pilot project will combine lessons learned from other closed-containment initiatives and Marine

Harvest's knowledge and experience to help answer questions such as:

Will commercial-scale closed containment be capable of growing quality fish?

Will this technology produce the desired environmental benefits?

Will the technology prove to be economically and financially viable?

The Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform and Marine Harvest Canada have also developed a co-ordinated area management plan for the Broughton Archipelago, an interim management plan that strives to reduce the likelihood of farmed salmon transferring sea lice to wild salmon during the out-migration season.

The initiative is designed to keep sea lice levels on farmed salmon during the out-migration season of juvenile pink and chum salmon (March 1 to June 30) below levels recommended by regulators.

This is done by establishing alternating fallow routes and applying precautionary sea-lice treatments. Initial science-based monitoring results indicate that, for the time being, the plan might be an effective management tool.

We have learned a great deal about reducing the risk of sea lice in the Broughton Archipelago through the co-ordinated area management plan. Now we are seeking a greater understating of the benefits of technological innovation.

But we can't do this on our own. Both the provincial and federal governments need to step up to the plate.

They need to support the area management plan through regulatory action and they need to invest along with us in technological innovation.

Governments need to get on board and help us achieve success. As Einstein advised, problems will best be solved by new ways of thinking and therefore acting.

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