

Fish farm welcomed

Mayor invites Mainstream Canada officials to discuss new operations in Port Alberni

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Port Alberni opened its arms to a land-based salmon farm last week, a timely move to attract industry before pending regulatory changes shift fish farm oversight from the province to the federal government.

Local Mayor Ken McRae invited officials at Mainstream Canada, one of the country's biggest fish-farm companies, to make use of a piece of city land. The property is near the waterfront and is well suited to a closed-containment salmon farm, McRae said.

"It's right on the water and there's First Nations around because they like to involve the First Nations and they have a reserve right next door," he said.

According to McRae, the shift of regulatory responsibility to the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans in January could mean more pressure on the fish farming industry to shift its operations to land. But whether that's true remains the topic of speculation.

In recent years fish farms have been in the crosshairs of environmentalists and government, who blame the farms, and the parasites that feed on farmed fish, for the collapse of wild salmon stocks. Although scientific evidence is inconclusive, many are still pushing to move salmon farms entirely on land.

Laurie Jensen, sustainability manager for Mainstream Canada, said the technology doesn't yet exist to raise commercial quantities of harvestable salmon on land. As it is, technology still mimics nature. Salmon fry are raised in fresh water, but reach maturity in salt water.

"It's easy enough to raise a ton of small fish on land, that's relatively proven," said Jensen. "But to raise 40,000 tons of salmon on land using salt water has not been proven. Nor has that ever actually been done."

Jensen also questioned whether it would ever happen. She said in order to shift Mainstream's current capacity to a land-based model would require the space of 7,500 football fields. What's more, the energy it would take to conduct such an operation and the water it would consume would likely negate any potential gains found in such a move.

"There's another concern people forget about, and that's animal welfare," said Jensen. "Fish like big spaces and closed containment is about confined spaces. We're talking about the humane treatment of animals."

So the industry is collectively holding its breath pending the release of new regulations when the federal government takes over. In the meantime, fish farm scientists continue studying ways to make a land-based operation possible, said

Colleen Dane, communications manager for the B.C. Salmon Farmers Association.

But whether such technology is ever developed might be irrelevant. Mainstream is still looking to expand its operations and Port Alberni is offering the space.

"I know we are looking for a land-based brood facility, so that's probably the most rational," said Jensen. "But I wouldn't want to speculate until they (Port Alberni and Mainstream officials) have a conversation."

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