

Randy Christensen and David Lane: Feds need to force B.C. fish farms to drop cloak and dagger act

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The way the B.C. government and the province's fish farm industry do business you'd expect them to be guarding nuclear secrets, not salmon tissue samples.

Yet, time and time again, they break out the cloak and dagger routine, twisting themselves up in knots to prevent industry information—specifically about disease and [sea lice infestations](#) on farms—from being made public.

The question is why?

Why don't B.C. salmon farmers—who get taxpayer money through government subsidies—want the public to know what diseases are on their farms?

Why does the province's agriculture ministry continue to placate industry interests at the expense of the public's right to know?

As of April 1, salmon farms have refused to volunteer or make available tissue samples for provincial fish health and lice monitoring audits, rendering government officials impotent and incapable of regulating the notoriously secretive industry.

Wild salmon—notably [sockeye stocks](#) in the Fraser River, subject of the federal Cohen inquiry—are now at even greater risk because the government cannot effectively monitor, much less contain, lice and disease outbreaks in critical areas, like salmon migration routes.

The industry's lack of cooperation has shone a humiliating light on the utter ineffectiveness of the ministry's voluntary compliance strategy, with not even so much as a whimper of protest from the province. To date, the ministry has done nothing to force information and samples from the fish farmers.

This development undermines previous assertions made by both government and industry that B.C. salmon farms are safe and pose no threat to wild salmon stocks. Without publicly accessible data to back up those claims, why should anyone believe industry?

Ecojustice and T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation know firsthand the lengths to which government and industry have gone to resist transparent reporting.

It took us six years and an order from the information commissioner for the government to finally release sea lice infestation and disease data from 2002-03. Despite this, despite the wasted time and resources, the ministry has taken pains to block a request for the exact same data for 2004-2010.

This bureaucratic wrestling comes as the public's right to know is as paramount as ever.

The dramatic decline of the Fraser River's sockeye run has spawned the Cohen inquiry, a federal investigation into the collapse. Among the factors to be examined is the role of salmon farm disease outbreaks and sea lice infestations.

With the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans poised to take over regulation of the industry and the Cohen inquiry to resume hearings this fall, now is the time to end this wasteful cycle of secrecy and toothless regulation.

This is an opportunity to usher in a new transparent, effective system. Draft federal aquaculture regulations are now available for public comment. There have been some promises of more openness, but there is actually nothing in the regulations themselves that would provide better public accountability and information access.

Going forward, DFO needs to bring in more stringent monitoring regulations to replace voluntary and discretionary reporting. The department also needs to ensure public access to this information and finally lift the shroud of secrecy on the fish farm industry.

Failing to act now, to seize this golden opportunity for change, will leave wild salmon populations at the mercy of industry interests, which to date, have shown little consideration for anything other than cold, hard cash.

Our wild salmon—a B.C. icon, precious resource, and cornerstone of our province's well-being—deserve better. We, the public, deserve better.

It's time for DFO to stand up and deliver where the salmon farm industry and the provincial government have so miserably failed.

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