

B.C. unable to monitor fish health

With Ottawa preparing to take over the job, fish farms stop cooperating with province

By Jes Abeita, Vancouver Sun, August 6, 2010



The BC Salmon Farmers Association is looking for a private company to monitor fish diseases. (Photo by: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun)

The B.C. Ministry of Agriculture is no longer able to audit information on fish health and sea lice provided by B.C. salmon farms.

In April, the farms stopped providing the ministry with samples of fish tissue and carcasses, which the ministry normally uses to double-check information provided by the farms.

Industry representatives said they took the action in preparation for the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans' takeover of fish farm regulation from the province in December.

They said they're still collecting the samples, but believe the information should be audited by an independent, private company during the transition to ensure it is done consistently.

However, nobody is doing such audits at the moment: The fish farmers' association is still reviewing proposals from companies that want the job.

Patrick Vert, a spokesman for the agriculture ministry, said until the federal government takes over, "there is surveillance taking place but there is no data from carcasses or live fish," to track disease or lice.

Colleen Dane of the BC Salmon Farmers Association said farms have not changed their testing procedures, even though samples no longer go to the ministry.

"Fish health technicians collect samples from dead fish collected on the site," about once a week and test to find the cause of death, she said. The monitoring also includes checking live fish, selected at random, for sea lice. The information is put into a database and shared with the ministry.

Farmer's association executive director Mary Ellen Walling said that since the ministry was "winding down" its aquaculture department in preparation for the transition to federal oversight, the industry decided third-party auditing was the best way to safeguard the integrity of the information the farms are collecting.

David Lane, executive director of the T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation, called the lack of audits on the salmon farms' data a "ridiculous notion." He added: "This is a long-standing program that the provincial government has done to audit the numbers that are collected by the salmon farming companies --for them to just drop that and stop complying means there is no government oversight."

Walling said the farms are still in compliance with management plans and ministry staff still visit the farms to check for compliance.

But Lane said compliance with the management plans is irrelevant without samples being submitted to provincial authorities for testing.

"I hope the DFO is looking very closely at this and realizing voluntary measures don't work," Lane said.

"This is just as if restaurant owners were doing their own food inspections and sending it off to the restaurant owners' association with no government inspectors coming in to take a look at things."

Trevor Swerdfager, director general of aquaculture management for the DFO, said the federal regulations will leave "no room for waffling around."

The proposed federal regulation would give the minister the authority "to require, not suggest or encourage or cajole, but to simply require as a condition of licence that sort of information be provided to us," Swerdfager said.

The proposed regulations can be viewed online at <http://www.gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2010/2010-07-10/html/reg2-eng.html>.

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