

Williams Lake Tribune

Sea lice can affect Cariboo sockeye stocks: biologist

By Erin Hitchcock - Williams Lake Tribune

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Farmed salmon is increasingly putting the future of wild salmon at risk, says a fisheries biologist who visited Williams Lake on the weekend to talk to environmental groups about the growing problem.

Stan Proboszcz is a fisheries biologist with the Watershed Watch Salmon Society who spoke to the Tribune the day before getting into Williams Lake, one of several communities he is visiting around B.C. to raise awareness of fish farms and their impact on wild salmon stocks.

Proboszcz, who is working with the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform, was in Williams Lake as part of a new program. He and his colleagues are travelling throughout the Fraser River area to talk to environmental groups and First Nations about potential impacts of farms on Fraser River stocks.

“What’s been happening is there’s been a problem in the Broughton Archipelago with sea lice affecting pink and chum salmon there,” Proboszcz says, adding that subsequently there has been work done by scientist Alex Morton in the Discovery Islands and Campbell River area in the Strait of Georgia about sea lice infection on wild, juvenile pink and chum salmon.

“What she found was the same sort of thing — pink and chum salmon are being infected by sea lice, and it looks as though they are coming from the farms,” Proboszcz says, adding that Morton also found sockeye salmon being infected as well.

The Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform followed up on Morton’s research and is currently working on a study with the Pacific salmon Commission and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

“We’re just starting to get the preliminary results,” he notes. “But it seems of the three species [pink, chum, and sockeye] that have been sampled in 2007 ... sockeye were the most heavily infected by sea lice around farms,” he says.

In addition, the study is also looking at genetic analysis to see the origin of the sockeye fish — the two dominant stocks being the Chilco and Quesnel stocks.

He says he and his colleagues were to meet with the BC Wildlife Federation on the weekend. First Nations groups, he says, have also been contacted and information about the issue will be sent to them.

Proboszcz's colleague Ruby Berry, the salmon aquaculture program co-ordinator with the Georgia Strait Alliance in Nanaimo, is also travelling throughout B.C. to let people know how farmed salmon are affecting wild stocks.

“Over the years, we have become increasingly aware of the problems it is causing to the ecosystems in the area,” she says, adding that salmon farming produces a lot of waste that is affecting the immediate surrounding ecosystems.

She says about eight to 10 years ago, people started to realize that small fry coming out of the rivers were being affected as they passed the farms. Since then, researches have found that sea lice — a naturally occurring phenomena mostly found in the deeper areas of the ocean — may be the reason why.

The bloodsucking parasites don't usually impede an adult salmon, and when the adult salmon swim back into the rivers, the sea lice are killed by the fresh water so they fall off the salmon and die. Young, small salmon don't usually encounter the lice until they're adults.

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“Now that there are farms in those pathways, the lice are transferred from the wild adult salmon to the farmed adult salmon, and when the juvenile baby salmon come out, they swim through the farms and the lice attack them when they're not big enough to handle it,” Berry explains. “What we've learned over the years, much to our despair, is that this is having a huge effect on the populations of salmon.”

She adds that researches predict that if nothing is changed, local salmon runs could be extinct in the next four or five years.

She says salmon farms need to be in close, rather than open, containment areas in order to deal with the interactions between farmed and wild salmon.

She says the provincial and federal governments would need to provide funding to industry, however, in order for pilot projects to begin, as the transition would be too costly for farms to do alone.

“Getting the farms out of the water will save the wild salmon, and getting them into close containment will save the industry,” Berry says. “It's not our intention to shut down the industry. It's our intention to get it to be acting in a way that isn't devastating to the surrounding ecosystem.”

She adds that science is showing that, depending on the runs, up to 95 per cent more wild salmon die as a result of salmon farming.

“The research shows there is a significant difference in returns based on whether there are farms or whether there aren’t.”

Getting the federal or provincial governments to ensure that farmed salmon are no longer in open containment areas may be a challenge, Proboszcz says, since there has been some issues as to which level of government has jurisdiction over salmon farms.

“It’s our opinion that that sort of lawsuit shouldn’t stall things,” he says. “We don’t want the governments to point their fingers at each other for a year and say we don’t really know who should deal with these problems. I don’t think that’s an excuse.”

He says the program’s primary concern is to get the message out to the public to talk to their MLAs and MPs about the issues.