

ASF concerned about virus outbreak

BY CLAYTON HUNT



TC Media file photo

The Atlantic Salmon Federation says there needs to be open discussion between fish farming companies and Atlantic Canadians following a virus outbreak among farmed salmon.

Inviting industry leaders to discuss issues

The president of the Atlantic Salmon Federation (ASF) says Fisheries Minister Darin King has made some misleading statements about a viral outbreak at a Gray Aquaculture site in the Coast of Bays.

Bill Taylor said the ASF is concerned with King saying the outbreak of infectious salmon anemia (ISA) was just a cost of doing business, and that the virus contracted by the farmed fish came from wild salmon.

"This is a complete fallacy, unfounded by science," he said, "and we have a grave concern with the statement. There has been only one documented case of an ISA outbreak in wild salmon, so it's not a disease that originates in the wild."

"Wild salmon only get ISA under extremely stressful conditions," said Taylor."

The only detection of ISA in wild Atlantic salmon was a result of the wild fish coming into contact with farmed infected salmon during the outbreak in New Brunswick in the late 1990s.

"There is no doubt — ISA is a farmed salmon problem. The disease has reared its ugly head wherever there are salmon farming industries, beginning with Norway and spreading to Scotland, the Faroes, Chile, Maine, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and now Newfoundland and Labrador."

Taylor said the problem stems mainly from open pen salmon farming.

"When you put tens of thousands of salmon in confined space, they are stressed and disease will break out in a significant way and that's what happened at Butter Cove," he said.

"Wherever open pen net aquaculture has been undertaken, there has been huge environmental consequences to pay. I think for Minister King to say that the outbreaks of ISA are going to happen and that it's just a case of doing business is very irresponsible and very misleading to the public."

The ASF doesn't support open pen salmon farming, he said.

"We certainly recognize the many benefits of salmon aquaculture in that it is providing jobs and it is a good food product. There are alternatives to open net pen aquaculture, such as raising salmon in land based operations."

Glenn Cooke, CEO of Cooke Aquaculture, says it isn't feasible to raise production fish for market in land-based environments. In a statement, Cooke said that's because the environmental impact of land-based salmon farming is greater because of the electricity that is required to pump, heat, cool, recirculate and filter water, as well as the need to dispose of waste.

Taylor countered that Cooke's statement is also misleading, arguing that he exaggerated the costs for land-based aquaculture.

"Mr. Cooke is referring to studies done several years ago and technologies have improved considerably since then.

"The carbon footprint of land-based aquaculture is not as significant as many people might believe," he said.

"We've been running a partnership between the Conservation Fund Freshwater Institute and West Virginia where we are raising salmon on land in closed containment. We've been able to do it cost competitively, so if we can do it I'm sure others can, too.

"We're producing healthy, unstressed fish, free of disease and sea lice, without vaccines, harsh chemicals and antibiotics in closed-containment on land.

"For the past 14 months we've been farming Atlantic salmon on land in closed containment. These fish can't escape into the wild. Our water is all recirculated and recycled, and all the uneaten food and feces is collected."

Taylor said harsh vaccines or chemicals haven't been needed.

"Our product that has gone to market has received rave reviews from consumers and executive chefs across the country."

He said some of these land-based closed containment systems are starting to pop up around the world and grounds are being broken for facilities in the United States and Canada.

"We're looking at operations that can raise between three and five thousand tonnes of salmon annually. Entrepreneurs are doing this, and they would not be in the industry if they didn't think it would be cost competitive."

Need to talk

Taylor said he does agree with Cooke when he says that Atlantic Canadians and farming companies deserve a respectful conversation about the realities of fish farming.

"There needs to be that open and frank dialogue, and we need to think outside the box on many issues facing aquaculture," he said.

"I would say to industry leaders as a whole that there needs to be an open and frank discussion between industry, the public, government leaders and environmental groups about aquaculture development moving forward."

Taylor said the ASF is hosting a workshop Oct. 11 and 12 at its headquarters in St. Andrew's, N.B.

"We are bringing in fish farmers, provincial, federal and state politicians from the east coast of North America to get up to speed on current technologies and to deal with some of the key issues related to the industry."

The Coaster