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Fish farm tests found wanting

BY BRUCE ERSKINE BUSINESS REPORTER

High sulphide areas of salmon operation being left out — group

Environmental monitoring of a controversial Eastern Shore salmon farm has failed to retest areas with high sulphide levels, says a local community group opposed to open-pen aquaculture.

“They’ve avoided those sites,” Bill Williams, a member of the Association for the Preservation of the Eastern Shore, said Wednesday in an interview from Sheet Harbour.

The association obtained environmental monitoring data for the Owls Head salmon farm late last year from the provincial Fisheries and Aquaculture Department.

Snow Island Salmon, a subsidiary of the Loch Duart of Scotland, owns the Owls Head lease.

The association said the data indicated that Owls Head exceeded provincial monitoring guidelines in 2009 and 2010,

with sulphide levels in sediments more than four times above acceptable levels.

The farm was fallowed for two years and restocked last year, the association said.

Williams, a retired firefighter, said monitoring stations with the highest sulphide readings in 2009 were not retested last year, and new monitoring sites don’t follow department procedures established in 2011.

Those procedures call for sampling stations to be evenly spaced on either side of the longitudinal axis of a farm site, with a station at either end of the axis, Williams said.

“The stations seem to have gotten moved around,” he said.

Williams said sulphide from excess fish food and salmon feces can kill marine life, including lobster larvae.

“How will the province know when there is an impact from the farm if they are not sampling in the right place?”

He said he wrote Fisheries and Aquaculture Minister Sterling Belliveau and Premier Darrell Dexter about the association’s findings in December but hasn’t heard back from either.

Vimy Glass, manager of aquaculture development with the Fisheries and Aquaculture department, said Wednesday the association made “some generalizations from a great deal of data that aren’t necessarily accurate.”

Glass, who said she would be happy to meet with the association to go through the data, said that while some readings were high, the site is considered healthy.

Shane Borthwick, Snow Island's vice-president of operations, said sulphide levels peak just before harvest and subside after harvest, when a farm site is fallowed for 18 months.

"It's important to manage sulphide," Borthwick said.

The company has followed provincial guidelines, he said.

Marine biologist Inka Milewski, who analyzed the data for the association, said provincial regulators are wrong to think the biological effects of high sulphide from fish farms can be easily reversed.

"My research in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia indicates that the toxic effects can last years," Milewski said in a news release.

"The water depth and currents in the bays and estuaries of Nova Scotia are just too shallow and too weak to accommodate the massive amount of waste produced in open-net pen salmon farms."

Milewski, an adviser with the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, advocates land-based aquaculture, which the Nova Scotia government has said isn't commercially viable.

Snow Island has applied to the province for leases on two aquaculture sites at Spry Harbour and Shoal Bay on the Eastern Shore.

Last fall, it withdrew an application for a site at Beaver Harbour, 10 kilometres east of the West River, after the Atlantic Salmon Federation raised concerns about its potential impact on migrating wild salmon.