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South Coast Today

Storm-tossed fish farms - escapes feared

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Salmon cage at St. Mary's Bay - Thursday, February 21, 2013

A series of vicious winter storms have ravaged the seas off the coast of Nova Scotia and the two dozen or more industrial salmon cages near Long Island, NS may be the most recent victim. The salmon cages belong to New Brunswick-based, multi-national Cooke Aquaculture and were installed there in 2011, after Nova Scotia's aquaculture and fisheries minister Sterling Belliveau approved the new, 209-acre salmon farms for St. Mary's Bay, reported by Cooke to be stocked with 1.4 million salmon.

There were strong protests at the time from local community groups and fishermen in the area, with one of the concerns being the unlikelihood of the cages being able to withstand the wicked seas in the area, putting the cages at risk for dismemberment and, according to local fishermen and others, risking the escape of up to 1.4 million fish.

"It's like a debris field," said one fisherman, who visited the site on his way to pulling lobster traps on Wednesday. "The cages are wrecked, the netting is gone and the seals are gorging on fish." Just days ago, fishermen also reported "clumps" of dead sea birds floating in the bay, not far from the cages. "It looked to me," said one fisherman, "like someone had taken a big fish tote full of birds and dumped it in the water," Others have conjectured that the birds could have been dumped and were now floating in the tide stream in the bay. The sighting was reported to Canadian Environment, who reportedly collected some samples for testing in a laboratory in PEI.

Belliveau convinced of safety

Minister Belliveau said in 2011 that the projects were reviewed extensively by scientists from the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans and that "They have reassured us there will be no adverse effects on the environment and I believe in the science." Belliveau has since admitted that his staff has never been allowed to review the science from DFO and other agencies, because they are considered "internal documents."

Company spokesperson Nell Halse said in 2011 that the the pens were the first step in a massive expansion program for Cooke Aquaculture, who has also received permission from Belliveau to install two other industrial farms near Jordan Bay

Cooke Aquaculture calls itself the largest "fully integrated" and independent salmon farming company in North America, with operations also in Spaine, USA and Chile.

More than 80 per cent of the population signed a petition against the new salmon farm leases, citing fear of escapes as a primary concern.

Cooke's Nell Halse told SCT via email Thursday that only minor damage to bird nets and hand rails was done by the storms and that necessary repairs have been done. She said the farm is secure, with no loss of fish. Cooke expects to harvest the mature fish in "the next few months." Other sources say that

divers hired by the Nova Scotia Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture has visited the site to check for damage.

Lobster traps contain salmon

Fishermen in the area say that they have found salmon inside the lobster traps, some as far as six miles from the farms. One fisherman said, "how are these fish ending up in our traps, if they didn't come from those cages?"

Sue Scott, spokesperson for the Atlantic Salmon Federation says her members are concerned with the prospect of salmon farm escapees and the effect on wild populations. "The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada has assessed the wild Atlantic salmon populations in the Bay of Fundy as endangered," she told SCT. In a recent report, COSEWIC cited "negative effects of interbreeding or ecological interactions with escaped domestic salmon from fish farms" as being key threats to wild salmon populations.

"The need for expedient detection and reporting of escapes is fundamental when it comes to protecting wild Atlantic salmon from the impacts of escaped farmed salmon," Scott added.

"Government must hold industry accountable by requiring it to intercept, identify and remove farmed escapees for each and every river system that is exposed.

She says that, if this became a requirement of industry, the costs associated with current open sea-cage aquaculture would rise considerably.

"Taking the financial impacts of damaging the environment into account certainly would strengthen the case for the economic feasibility of land-based closed containment operations, which have no harmful impact on wild salmon populations and their environment," Scott said.

Salmon escapes not uncommon

In the last three decades of salmon farming expansion worldwide, the escape of farmed salmon into the wild has been an issue, with some scientists saying that up to 90 percent of the wild salmon in Canada and elsewhere may be fugitives and their progeny. In 1983, escapees accounted for only 5.5 percent of the salmon in New Brunswick's Magagaudavic River; by 1995 the percentage had jumped to 90 percent.

In 1995, escaped Atlantic salmon had moved into 18 British Columbia rivers; six years later, they were living in 77 rivers and streams throughout the province.

In 1999, samples of four domestic Atlantic salmon escapees and 10 wild salmon returning to the Magaguadavic River to spawn showed all fish carried the Infectious Salmon Anaemia (ISA) virus—never before seen in wild salmon. ISA has infected salmon in at least nine farms in Atlantic Canada in 2012 and 2013.

In 2002 that three out of four salmon escapes occurred from farms in Scotland affected by highly contagious and often fatal Infectious Pancreatic Necrosis, which was just reported by the Canadian government to have infected trout in a farm in Nova Scotia.

In 2011, 138,000 juvenile farmed salmon into the Bay of Fundy from nets torn during storms, which, due to the storms, went unrepaired for several days. The New Brunswick government said at the time there had been three escape incidences in as many months.

In British Columbia, the incidence of farmed salmon escapees seems epidemic, with over one million farmed salmon escaped into B.C. waters between 1987 and 1996 and more than 200,000 from 2008 to 2010.

Efforts to improve the situation there have met with only marginal success. In 2008, 111,000 farmed salmon were reported to have escaped from salmon farms in B.C. In 2009, one escape of 47,000 Atlantic salmon was not reported to the public until after fishermen began catching Atlantic salmon in their nets. At the end of 2010 another 15,700 Atlantic salmon escaped into B.C. waters from a farm using the latest net-pen technology and was only made public in the parent company's quarterly report.

Aquaculture operators in Nova Scotia are required by their lease agreements to inform provincial officials within four hours of an escape and standard practice has been for those officials to inform DFO. A spokesperson with NSDFA said that, although they have no report of an escape, an inspector with the department was on its way to the site Thursday afternoon.

When local fishermen attempted to take photos of the battered cages, Cooke employees threatened to call RCMP to report "trespassing."

