

Fish farmer denies disease killing fish

BY BRUCE ERSKINE BUSINESS REPORTER

Harsh winter conditions blamed

Activity at Snow Island's salmon farm on the Eastern Shore is a reflection of a harsh winter, not disease, says the company's operations vice-president.

"We don't have any disease outbreak," Shane Borthwick said in an interview Monday.

"The vast majority of the fish are doing fine."

Snow Island, a subsidiary of Loch Duart of Scotland, is farming 475,000 salmon in 24 pens off Owls Head, near Ship Harbour.

The Association for the Preservation of the Eastern Shore, a community group opposed to open-pen salmon farming, is concerned activities at Owls Head may indicate there is a disease outbreak.

Borthwick said those concerns were "absolutely, 100 per cent unfounded."

Bill Williams of Sheet Harbour, a member of the Eastern Shore group, said Monday he didn't know whether fish at the Owls Head farm had an outbreak of infection.

But Williams said he has seen a large number of dead fish removed from the site in recent days and wants to know what is being done with them.

He claimed Snow Island was moving pens and said there was a slick of oil on the water near the farm that he suggested may be from decomposing fish.

"I don't think that's normal."

Borthwick said the company hasn't moved any pens and is simply doing routine inspections that have been interrupted by difficult weather conditions. The inspections include the removal of dead fish.

“We’ve had a harsh winter.”

Those conditions have prevented divers from inspecting the farm and removing dead fish as often as they would normally, Borthwick said.

Fish farms have mortalities every week, but the stock at Owls Head appears to have come through the recent cold, windy weather in good shape, he said.

“It’s like any farm. You need to clean it up.”

Borthwick didn’t have mortality numbers but expected there may be a few more deaths than normal, given recent conditions.

The dead fish are being removed to government-approved disposal sites, as required under the company’s operating permit, he said.

Krista Higdon, a provincial Fisheries and Aquaculture Department spokeswoman, said Snow Island is required to notify the department if anything is amiss at its operations.

“They haven’t,” Higdon said. “We’ve had no reports.”

Salmon at farms that Cooke Aquaculture of New Brunswick operates in other parts of this province have been infected with infectious salmon anemia.

The disease is deadly to fish but doesn’t pose a human health risk, according to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

The agency has allowed Cooke to process and market some of the diseased salmon.

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