Jan 28 2013 Chronicle Herald

Biologist: Virus could kill aquaculture

Infectious salmon anemia 'extremely onimous' for industry

BY BRUCE ERSKINE BUSINESS REPORTER

Salmon farming in the Maritimes could be sunk if a virus that kills the fish can't be eradicated, says a prominent British Columbia marine biologist.

"This spells the end of the salmon farming industry in the Maritimes unless they can persuade people to eat salmon infected with an influenza-type virus," Alexandra Morton said in an email Monday.

"They will not be able to raise fish without this virus finding them."

Morton was responding to a CBC report Monday that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has concluded it can't eradicate infectious salmon anemia in Atlantic waters and has changed its focus to preventing the virus, which kills fish but is considered harmless to humans.

The conservationist, who gave the Ransom A. Myers Lecture in Science and Society at Dalhousie University last fall, said the last four outbreaks of infectious salmon anemia reported in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador describe a new strain of the virus.

"This is extremely ominous," Morton said. "This means the virus has mutated into a more deadly strain. This confirms that it is not from the wild fish."

Cooke Aquaculture of New Brunswick has had to kill hundreds of thousands of salmon infected with infectious salmon anemia at its Nova Scotia operations in the past year.

But it has been allowed to transport about 240,000 infected fish from a farm near Liverpool to a fish processing plant in New Brunswick under new inspection agency protocols.

Cooke spokesman Chuck Brown said aquaculture companies have managed infectious salmon anemia for years.

"It is a virus that occurs in the natural environment, and we have continued to be proactive in managing it, protecting our fish and preventing it from spreading," Brown said in an email.

"Early detection is critical, and I think we're seeing how this is working. We were able to detect ISA at the Coffin Island farm near Liverpool, report it to CFIA and the province of Nova Scotia, follow CFIA protocols and, under quarantine, protect other fish while growing the ones on site to market size."

The province has lent Cooke $25 million to expand its operations in Nova Scotia, with$9 million forgiven through the Nova Scotia Jobs Fund.

Morton said infectious salmon anemia also poses a serious risk to wild salmon, which is a major issue for the Atlantic Salmon Federation.

“It’s very concerning,” federation spokeswoman Sue Scott said Monday in an interview from Saint Andrews, N.B.

“The salmon populations are in danger of ISA infection.”

Scott said she couldn’t understand why Cooke was allowed to keep infected farmed salmon in Nova Scotia waters for months before shipping them to New Brunswick for processing.

“What happened to the idea that they’re supposed to be removed to prevent the spread of infection?”

The federation, which works to revitalize wild Atlantic salmon stocks, wants government to stop the expansion of open-net pen aquaculture in favour of land-based systems.

Inspection agency officials could not be reached for comment.

Provincial Fisheries and Aquaculture Department spokesman Brett Loney said the inspection agency, as Canada’s lead fish health organization, is responsible for handling infectious salmon anemia, but the province continues to monitor Nova Scotia farms for the virus.

“Fish health is a critical priority in our aquaculture strategy and our regulations will work to reduce the risk of ISA.”

The Association for the Preservation of the Eastern Shore is putting its opposition to open-pen salmon farms on the road.

The community group announced a two-month campaign Monday that will see Metro Transit buses carrying signs saying Save Our Coastal Waters and Economy. Tell Premier Dexter to Stop Open Pen Fish Farming. The signs will include directions to two associated websites, nsapes.ca and salmonwars.com.