

Jan 3, 2013

The Telegram

Boycott of salmon feedlot attempts to go viral



A wild pink salmon smolt with sea lice. The photo was taken near fish farms in the Broughton Archipelago. — Photo courtesy of Alexandra Morton

A new Internet campaign urges people to boycott salmon grown on feedlots in the aquaculture industry from coast to coast.

The grassroots movement, salmonfeedlotboycott.com, relies on small donations from the public and has an online petition that people can sign to show their support for boycotting salmon grown in marine pens or feedlots.

Anissa Reed of British Columbia is a supporter of the movement.

"It's a call to the public because they're the only people that can change this and turn it around," she says.

Reed was born in B.C., but her family is from Bonavista. She says her connection to the sea runs deep, not just because she and her family come from both coasts, but because of her past occupations. She has worked in dive tourism, but also managed an Atlantic salmon farm years ago.

"It just felt wrong in so many ways," says Reed.

Much of the concern over salmon that are farmed in the natural marine environment rather than on land-based facilities comes from the spread of disease back and forth from the penned salmon to wild salmon. As well, critics point to the pollution released as excess feed and fish waste sink to the ocean floor.

"My fear is salmon feedlots are going to destroy the environment in a way we're not going to be able to recover from in our lifetime," says Reed.

However, supporters of the local aquaculture industry say accusations made by the group are untrue. Cyr Couturier is the executive director of the Newfoundland Aquaculture Industry Association (NAIA). He says the little organic matter that does get through the pen and to the sea floor is over such a big area that the environment is capable of assimilating it.

As far as the spread of disease goes, the aquaculture industry in this province dealt with its share of problems and a dose of controversy, as well. In 2012, there were two confirmed cases of infectious salmon anemia (ISA), the second just last month.

The disease doesn't affect people and occurs among salmon in the wild, but there is the concern that an outbreak in farmed fish will lead to increased incidents in wild salmon. Diseases are spread from farmed to wild salmon through the pens they grow in, and the threat of farmed fish escaping into the wild is an argument often used in boycotts against fish farming. There is also the argument that concentrated incidents of disease in pens provide unnatural conditions whereby diseases can mutate.

Couturier says in this province, the health-monitoring system is rigid.

"We're very fortunate that we have a very good fish health-monitoring protocol here," he says.

Diseases can be detected early on and, if need be, the fish can be put in quarantine. If disease is confirmed, the fish are eradicated to prevent possible spread.

This was the case with both incidents of ISA last year.

The extreme measures that must be taken when farmed fish catch a disease like ISA is used by groups such as salmonfeedlotboycott.com to point to the disastrous potential salmon farms can have on wild salmon stocks.

At the same time, advocates counter the measures illustrate how responsible the industry is being.

Couturier says they are able to detect disease early on and act on it readily. There haven't been any known cases of diseased fish escaping into the wild during the two outbreaks of salmon anemia in this province, he adds, and argues that only groups against fish farming refer to the process as net farming since the fish are in net pens from which they rarely ever escape.

Following the second outbreak of ISA, Fisheries and Aquaculture Minister Derrick Dalley said there was nothing to worry about and that such incidents were expected in developing aquaculture industries.

Reed begs to differ.

"I think (Dalley) has been drinking the Kool-Aid," she says.

She says even using the term "quarantine" in the industry is a joke because the fish are in net-pens that are open to the environment.

"During virus outbreaks, they talk about quarantine. My daughter who is in elementary school understands this is not possible."

The group's hope is that the boycott will go international. Reed says salmonfeedlotboycott.com did some basic polling, and more than 50 per cent of responders in the country supported boycotting fish farms.

As of Wednesday, there were just over 2,000 supporters on the group's website.

josh.pennell@thetelegram.com