

Marine scientist says environmental trouble brewing in Shelburne Harbour

Moratorium, data sharing and environmental review suggested

More than 150 people showed up in Shelburne Thursday to hear Inka Milewski, Science Advisor to the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, give a scientific guided tour of the sea bottom in Shelburne Harbour, under the site of a decommissioned salmon farm.

As part of the Aquaculture Dialogues series, Milewski presented the results of the first year of a multi-year research program in the Inner Shelburne Harbour conducted with the assistance of Nova Scotia-based McGregor GeoScience Ltd.

The seafloor imaging and benthic sampling survey at the old Sandy Point salmon aquaculture site showed a considerable degradation of the bottom.

Results of the survey indicate the area of sea bottom below the decommissioned site was highly contaminated and had a very low biodiversity rating. In a CBC interview Friday, Milewski described the sea bottom under the site as "grossly polluted" by large, white "bacterial mats."

The bottom surveyed had lost much of its biodiversity and was populated by a large number of "capitela" worms, which are known to thrive in environments rich in sulphur dioxide, which, she said, is a by-product of high sulphide levels resulting from concentrations of fish feces.

The results of the survey suggest that the entire Inner Shelburne Harbour may not have the capacity to assimilate the "organic waste load" from its multiple farm sites and that additional, sustained, cumulative organic waste loading may prove disastrous for salmon farm operators in Inner Shelburne Harbor.

Milewski revealed that salmon cage sites in Shelburne Harbour - and those likely to be approved in Jordan Bay - far exceed the guidelines for fish numbers established by Fishers and Oceans Canada. The likely consequence, says Milewski, is that the farm operators will continue to suffer regular losses from disease outbreaks and that the sites will become "dead zones" in which aquaculture cannot thrive.

Milewski said that, in her decades of research in the area, she has seen regular outbreaks of infectious salmon anemia (ISA), sea lice infect caged salmon populations in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. In February, Cooke Aquaculture was forced to slaughter 700,000 salmon in Shelburne Harbour and last week a firm in Newfoundland was ordered by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to slaughter more ISA-infected fish.

In April, Milewski sent a copy of the report and her findings to Fisheries and Aquaculture Minister Sterling Belliveau, with an invitation to meet with him to discuss her findings. She said that, to date, she has had no response to her offer.

The data gathered and analyzed by Milewski and colleagues led to her recommendation that the Inner Shelburne Harbour be cleared of all salmon farm sites. The farm sites are the most significant contributor of organic and nutrient loading to the Harbour and are preventing the Harbour from recovering," says Milewski.

Further, based on her findings, Milewski says the provincial government must place a moratorium on licensing new salmon farm sites until it conducts a thorough environmental review of existing sites.

The government must release all environmental monitoring data for all existing salmon farm sites, says Milewski. "If the province can't publicly produce environmental monitoring data from existing fish farms in a timely manner," she says, "They certainly can't be relied upon to act when environmental damage is being done by these farms".

Milewski has presented these findings in Ottawa concerning the former Sandy Point site, before the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans and has been an expert witness in the hearing by the Maine government regarding fin fish aquaculture regulations there.

The evening concluded with a showing of "Salmon Wars", a just-released documentary by Silver Donald Cameron.



