

May 1, 2013

CHRONICLE HERALD

Fishy timing on aquaculture file

Since releasing its ambitious aquaculture strategy a year ago, and financially helping Cooke Aquaculture expand salmon farming in Nova Scotia, the provincial government has been snoozing like an oyster bed on its promise to improve environmental regulation of the industry.

But the shell suddenly sprang open on Wednesday.

Fisheries Minister Sterling Belliveau announced a team of two experts, supported by no less than two committees (one of stakeholders, one of scientists), will conduct a public consultation to recommend aquaculture regulations and enforcement measures that protect coastal communities, traditional fisheries and the environment.

It's a welcome move. Creating public confidence that the industry can and will be managed responsibly, and without harm to other species, is crucial to community acceptance and to aquaculture's future in the province.

And the people thus far named to conduct the process are credible and diverse. They include Dalhousie environmental law experts Meinhard Doelle and William Lahey, supported by a stakeholder committee comprised of Chief Terry Paul of Membertou First Nation, Mark Butler of Ecology Action Centre, Carl Purcell of the Nova Scotia Salmon Association, Karen Traversy of the Coastal Coalition, Lisa Fitzgerald of the Fisheries Sector Council and Bruce Hancock of the Aquaculture Association.

Still, the timing and the time frame are suspect.

It looks more than a little fishy for the Dexter government to act on the eve of an anticipated election and to expect no recommendations until the end of 2014. There's a whiff here of clearing the decks of political irritants in preparation for a trip to the polls.

But then the government seems to have declared open season on public irritants lately, going after them as if they were the political equivalent of sea lice.

It has stopped unpopular school closures with a moratorium and consultation. It has flip-flopped to permit wine kits to be made in stores and to fund the SPCA. It has tried to offset the bad karma of raising the HST by introducing a bill requiring a referendum to approve any future move to put the tax on exempt items.

It has acted more swiftly and seriously on anti-bullying this spring, after the tragic death of Rehtaeh Parsons, than it did in responding to a task force on the issue a year ago.

And on Tuesday, Premier Darrell Dexter gave two highly partisan stump speeches, pitching members of the Nova Scotia Nurses Union and CUPE for their votes and opposing any consolidation of regional health authorities.

In the case of aquaculture, though, people may not be satisfied with a snail-pace reform of regulations and certainly don't want election planning to set the tempo.

Last week, Kelly Cove Salmon Ltd., a New Brunswick subsidiary of Cooke Aquaculture, pleaded guilty to illegally using a pesticide in 2009 that contributed to lobster kills in New Brunswick waters. The investigation was thorough and the company was held to account with \$500,000 in penalties. But its behaviour inevitably damages public confidence and trust in fish farming, despite promises from Cooke to invest millions in research and to never use illegal pesticides again. The province should not take another two years to do its regulatory part to address that skepticism.

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