

May 1, 2013

CBC News

N.S. moves to modernize 'weak' aquaculture regulations

Panel will examine regulations

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The Nova Scotia government is lending \$25 million to Cooke Aquaculture Inc. to expand its operations in Shelburne, Digby and Truro. (CBC)

Nova Scotia's NDP government is putting new marine-based aquaculture site applications on hold until a newly struck panel reports on ways to improve the rules surrounding aquaculture development.

The panel — headed by two environmental law experts from Dalhousie University, Bill Lahey and Meinhard Doelle — will not report back until after the next provincial election.

Fisheries Minister Sterling Belliveau said public consultations will begin this summer.

"The department will rely on these recommendations to draft new, world-class aquaculture regulations. These new regulations will be put in place as soon as possible, hopefully by the end of 2014," Belliveau said Wednesday.

The panel has been given 12 to 18 months to research, consult and report back and has an initial budget of \$300,000. Lahey and Doelle will receive a total of \$130,000 for their efforts.

The decision to put the brakes on new projects during the review is largely symbolic. Snow Island's Spry Harbour application is the only project before the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture.

It will proceed under current rules.

The Darrel Dexter government has poured tens of millions of dollars into the aquaculture industry, including direct financial assistance to the region's largest company Cooke Aquaculture of New Brunswick.

Nova Scotia recently approved proposed Cooke salmon farms in Jordan Bay, Shelburne County. The farms will hold over one million fish. As with other fish farms the approval process was controversial and divisive.

The upcoming review will involve players on all sides of the issue.

Six people with a stake in aquaculture have agreed to serve on an advisory committee.

"I think if this process is done correctly this is going to be an enabler to move the industry forward rather than something that is going to slow it down," said Bruce Hancock, executive director of the Aquaculture Association of Nova Scotia.

"If anything it's going to build that public confidence and move us forward."

Karen Traversy of the Coastal Coalition of Nova Scotia said she agreed to serve because of the independence and integrity of Doelle and Lahey, both of whom helped draft provincial environmental laws.

"We're optimistic they are sincere. They are putting some money behind it," Traversy said.

"They've chosen a good panel."

"We want to see a rigorous and robust regulatory regime that respects the ecological balance in our bays in our province and a process that allows communities not to feel helpless in the expansion going forward. Currently there is not a lot of credibility."

Carl Purcell of the NS Salmon Association is another sceptic serving as an adviser.

"We thought the rules and regulations were very weak," Purcell said Wednesday.

"I was very pleased to be called to serve on this panel. We've asked for it for quite a while. I think it's a step in the right direction. We have to make sure that it stays transparent," he said.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/story/2013/05/01/ns-aquaculture-panel.html>