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Fishing for aquacultural policy

BRUCE ERSKINE BUSINESS REPORTER

Federal legislation needed if industry is to reach potential, panel told



Representatives of some of the province's largest fish farming companies told a Senate committee that the industry needs clearer legislation and regulations in order to grow. (ADRIEN VECZAN/Staff)

Federal legislation is critical to growing aquaculture in Nova Scotia, says Bryan Bosien, vice-president of **Snow Island**, a salmon farm on the Eastern Shore.

"We don't have clear legislation," he said in an interview Thursday after appearing before the Senate committee in Halifax. The committee is studying aquaculture regulation.

"Anything to bring clarity to operators and stakeholders is welcome."

Bosien was part of a panel of industry witnesses that included Pamela Parker, executive director of the Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association; Peter Corey, president of the Aquaculture Association of Nova Scotia; and Nell Halse, vice-president of communications with **Cooke Aquaculture** of New Brunswick, the region's largest fish farming company.

In his remarks to the committee, which included Sen. Tom McInnis from Nova Scotia and Sen. Nancy Greene Raine from British Columbia, Bosien said Canada is the only farmed

seafood-producing country without national legislation specifically designed to govern its aquaculture industry.

“Modernizing the regulatory and policy framework will allow our industry to realize its full potential,” he said.

Parker, who claimed salmon is more popular than beef, said the existing “patchwork” regulatory system is overly complex and called for a national strategy under an aquaculture act.

Corey said streamlining the regulatory environment would enable investment and expansion of the industry.

“There is little doubt that aquaculture is the food production sector in Nova Scotia with the greatest potential for expansion.”

Bosien’s company has encountered opposition from local groups who say aquaculture threatens the wild marine environment. Those concerns led in part to a provincial moratorium on issuing new aquaculture licences pending a yet-to-be-completed government review that has left Snow Island in a holding pattern.

“Currently, we have no fish in the water,” he said. “We are waiting to apply for licences.”

Bosien said there has been a great deal of misinformation about aquaculture spread by a small group of industry opponents.

“I worked as a commercial diver for 15 years in the industry, and the pictures that I’ve seen posted on the Net about what it looks like underneath a salmon farm — I’m sorry, but that’s not my view of aquaculture.”

Raine asked whether the industry has considered zoning to address concerns about aquaculture from people who have spent a lot of money to buy ocean frontage for retirement or recreational uses.

Halse noted that the Atlantic region has a historic culture of working waterfronts, while Bosien said most farms are located some distance from shore.

“That’s definitely a consideration we take when we’re looking at farms,” he said.

McInnis called the industry's public engagement in Nova Scotia "terribly flawed," but Halse said public opinion polls commissioned by Cooke show support for further development of the industry in the province.

"A strong majority of Nova Scotians offer some level of support for the creation of a national aquaculture act."

Rob Johnson, sustainable seafood co-ordinator with the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax, attributed the stagnation of the salmon farming industry in Atlantic Canada to the negative environmental impacts of using the "flawed and outdated" technology of open-net pens.

"The real question should be, in fact, if it is effectively regulated, which could be measured by the current state of the industry," he said in an email Thursday.

"The reality of massive disease outbreaks and fish kills, community opposition, parasite infestations and toxic pesticide use, mass escapes of farmed fish into the wild and discharge of untreated and unregulated waste into the marine and coastal environment clearly show that net pen salmon farming is not effectively regulated.

"Waste from open-net pen salmon farms is untreated and unregulated. The salmon farming industry is not asking for this egregious deficiency in the regulations to be addressed. Clearly, there is a need for legislation to control unabated pollution, as in other industries such as the pulp and paper industry and sewage plants, which are required to treat their waste."

Johnson alleged the salmon farming industry is calling for an aquaculture act that would allow increased use of more toxic pesticides in the marine environment that may have negative effects on other species, such as lobsters.

The Senate committee plans to table a report with recommendations to the federal government by June 30, 2015.

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