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Approval of fish farms in Nova Scotia triggers environmental outcry

SHELBURNE, N.S. - Nova Scotia announced the approval of two aquaculture sites on the southwestern tip of the province Tuesday, sparking outcry from a conservation group that says the area is not appropriate for the open-net farming pens.

Kelly Cove Salmon Ltd., a subsidiary of New Brunswick-based Cooke Aquaculture Inc., has been granted the right to operate two fish farming pens in Shelburne County's Jordan Bay.

The government said a condition of the agreement includes site monitoring by a third-party consultant. Kelly Cove Salmon will also be required to establish a committee to provide a forum for communication with the community.

Fisheries Minister Sterling Belliveau said the company went through a rigorous two-year application process that concluded the sites would pose minimal risk to the area's environment.

"The province is committed to ensuring aquaculture continues to be an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable industry in Nova Scotia," Belliveau said in a statement.

"These new sites will help to further grow the industry and the economy in southwest Nova Scotia, while creating good, year-round jobs in rural communities."

The government's plans to expand the province's aquaculture industry have prompted criticism from some who say they're concerned about the impact the sector could have on traditional fisheries.

Susanna Fuller, marine conservation co-ordinator at the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax, said Jordan Bay is too shallow for fish farms and doesn't have a strong enough current to wash away fish waste.

"Shallow water with no current means all the feces from the salmon farms goes directly to the bottom and doesn't get flushed away," said Fuller.

"That area of the South Shore just doesn't really have huge flushing rates. They are shallow bays, and they're not appropriate for this kind of industrial farming."

Fuller said it was premature of the provincial government to approve the aquaculture sites before it reviews its regulations and policies for open-net pens as set out in an aquaculture strategy released earlier this year.

In the spring, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency ordered Cooke Aquaculture to destroy thousands of salmon in their ocean pens outside Shelburne Harbour due to the presence of infectious salmon anemia.

But the Nova Scotia government has shown its support for open-pen salmon farming, announcing a \$25-million loan to Cooke Aquaculture earlier this year to expand its operations in Shelburne, Digby and Truro.

Its aquaculture strategy also emphasized expanding the industry to create jobs in parts of rural Nova Scotia hit hard by unemployment and outmigration.