

Fish farm sites worry lobster fishermen

BY BRUCE ERSKINE BUSINESS REPORTER

Ricky Hallett says he has no doubt what the impact from two new aquaculture sites off Shelburne County will be.

“Jordan Bay will be the next problem in the aquaculture industry,” the lobster fisherman, who lives near and fishes in the bay, predicted Tuesday.

His comments came after provincial Fisheries and Aquaculture Minister Sterling Belliveau announced that the two sites, each containing 500,000 fish, will be operated by Kelly Cove Salmon Ltd., a subsidiary of New Brunswick’s Cooke Aquaculture Inc.

Belliveau, a former Shelburne fisherman who knows Hallett, said he understands the concerns raised about aquaculture’s potential impact on the bay. However, he maintained the conditions attached to the Jordan Bay leases will protect the marine environment.

“I have confidence in this industry,” he said. “I’m confident this can be done.”

The minister said aquaculture has a small footprint and can create good jobs in rural Nova Scotia.

Lease conditions include design and inspection measures to prevent fish escapes, enhanced third-party environmental monitoring and reduced stock densities.

In response to any environmental concerns, the fisheries department can also restrict production, require mitigation measures and prevent restocking until the site meets acceptable standards.

Hallett said the government has approved a failed business model that resulted in massive kills of diseased, Cooke-farmed salmon in Shelburne this year.

“It’s still a problem industry for Nova Scotia harbours,” he said.

Hallett said Jordan Bay is a habitat for egg-bearing female lobsters that will be affected by feces from farmed fish and excess feed dumped in its shallow waters.

“It’s an open dump site,” he said. “Did you ever see a maternity ward in a cesspool?”

The province said the 26-month approval process, which concluded the sites pose minimal risk to fish, fish habitat and fisheries resources, involved Transport Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Environment Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

But Hallett said the government “sat back on its oars” and waited till the busy Christmas season, when the legislature wasn’t sitting and lobster fishermen were out tending their traps, to make its announcement.

“It sounds good on paper, but where’s the science?” he said. “It’s not based on any facts.”

District of Shelburne Warden Roger Taylor called the approvals “another step forward” in the area’s economic development.

“We’ve always been supportive of sustainable aquaculture and have faith in the regulators and the regulatory process,” he said.

Cooke Aquaculture CEO Glenn Cooke said the Jordan Bay farms will complement the company’s other Shelburne aquaculture operations.

“We look forward to hiring 27 additional people as we prepare to stock the area’s farms in the spring of 2013,” he said in a news release.

Cooke spokeswoman Nell Halse said the company is eager to establish a required liaison committee to address community concerns regularly.

“We’re aware of the issues,” she said.

The province announced earlier this year that it was lending Cooke \$25 million to expand its operations in Nova Scotia, with \$9 million to be forgiven through the Nova Scotia Jobs Fund.

Cooke is a multinational aquaculture business with annual sales of more than \$570 million.

Halse suggested that 75 per cent of Nova Scotians support aquaculture and the important economic role it plays in coastal communities.

According to the Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association, Nova Scotia's salmon farm industry is worth about \$80 million annually and employs 670 people directly and indirectly.

There will be 14 salmon farms in Nova Scotia with the addition of the Jordan Bay farms, although not all are in production at the same time, the association said.