

## Sick fish economics: Sea change needed

BY RALPH SURETTE



Eleanor Kure holds up a sign during an open-pen salmon farm protest at Halifax's Grand Parade on Dec. 7. (RYAN TAPLIN / Staff)

Open-pen salmon farming in Nova Scotia is barely set up, and already it's a billowing disaster. The infectious salmon anemia (ISA) virus has hit — here as in many other places — and reputable scientists are saying it may not be possible to grow salmon in open pens in these waters without the affliction.

The official solution is hardly convincing and somewhat startling. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has declared ISA fish fit for human consumption for the first time, and they're being processed and marketed. But the Americans don't want them crossing the border, and reputable grocery chains and restaurants don't want them either. Even if they are harmless to humans (if not necessarily to other fish), "eat sick fish" is hardly a winning ad line.

In the process of pumping millions into an open-pen network, the Dexter government has a committee reviewing the matter as well as an inquiry to advance the rural economy. I'll presume it's going to fix this, but with an election on the horizon, it doesn't have much time.

Meanwhile, let's ask if there's anything useful to be learned from the economics and politics of the debacle.

The real failure here is to have pushed a dirty, polluting version of salmon farming just as it was becoming obvious worldwide that this is unsustainable, and as there's a push to grow them (and other fish as well) in contained pens, either on land or at sea. A number of these exist in Nova Scotia for various species. I have a news story from Scotland where the world's largest on-land salmon farm is being built (3.5 acres) outside Perth by a large salmon farming company called FishFrom. Andrew Robertson, the director, explained that "impacts on the environment and wildlife are unacceptably high" with open-pen systems. "We know it can't continue as it is."

It's not as though we're too backward to do it right in Nova Scotia. After all, we have a clutch of world-scale seafood companies now (High Liner, Ocean Nutrition, Clearwater, Acadian Seaplants), not to mention world-reknowned ocean research capacity. So how did it happen?

There's Premier Darrell Dexter's jobs obsession, which brooks no second thoughts once his head is down and he's charging; but it's more than that. A few years ago, Cooke Aquaculture head Glenn Cooke took Fisheries Minister Sterling Belliveau and the Liberal and Conservative fisheries critics to Chile, which has a huge industry, to show them how it's done. They all came back gaga. Since the Liberals are ahead in the polls, it's only fair to mention that their critic, Junior Theriault from Digby, now retired, was arguably the most gaga of all. They had all seen the future through Cooke's eyes and it worked.

The fact that the Chilean industry, the world's second largest (after Norway), worth \$2 billion, got ISA and collapsed between 2007 and 2009 didn't seem to matter. Why were we so backward, with all those beautiful bays doing nothing? Just ignore the squawking environmentalists and let a proper Maritime multinational do its work.

But it's more than that too. Since the advent of the Harper government, something we could call "pollution economics" has arisen. The only thing that counts is the resource industry, from the tarsands on down, the bigger and dirtier the more meritorious. Anyone who pushes back is an enemy of the state. Even manufacturing is of no account, except the auto industry.

And anyone who flinches when it comes to fracking, quarrying, open-pit mining and anything else — like open-pen salmon — that extracts economic value from environmental destruction is not up to scratch. That's the Maritimes, apparently.

Meanwhile an unrepentant Glenn Cooke is on trial in New Brunswick on multiple counts of dumping toxic substances into the ocean; in pollution economics, this is proof of his economic prowess.

The surprising — and to many New Democrats in particular, infuriating — thing is the extent to which, in this case, the NDP government bought into it, putting up no defence to the first story laid out by a promoter, and no sense of the larger reality, which even a scan via Google could have provided. The moral of the story is not that these jobs and an expansion of the salmon farming industry should not be pursued; it's that pursuing them at the price of polluting the commons is the wrong way of going at it, and may end up as an expensive liability and actually retard job creation.

In other words, nature has snapped back — a practical illustration of the fact that if jobs are not environmentally sustainable, in the long run they're no good. Surely there's a lesson to be learned here, and with regard to more than fish farms. And for the government, there's the political headache of reversing course, which it must now surely do.

*Ralph Surette is a veteran freelance journalist living in Yarmouth County.*

[rsurette@herald.ca](mailto:rsurette@herald.ca)