

Eastern Shore residents question the net value of offshore salmon farms

REPORTED BY
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Men harvesting farmed salmon. (Photo courtesy Snow Island Salmon)



Nova Scotia's Eastern Shore has been connected to the fishery for generations, back to the days of wooden dories.

But the recent arrival of open net fish farming has many Eastern Shore residents questioning the value of a modern fishery.

Depending on whom you talk to, proposed Eastern Shore aquaculture is either a potential boost for an economically challenged area, or an environmental scourge that threatens local waters and sea life.

[Snow Island Salmon](#), a subsidiary of Scotland-based Loch Duart, has applied to build [three fish farms](#) in the area: in Beaver Harbour, Spry Harbour and Shoal Bay.

Snow Island already has an approved fish farm at Owls' Head, where salmon has been successfully raised since 2008. This spring, the company plans to place a new crop of smolts (young salmon) at the Owls' Head site.

That is not welcome news to Karin Cope, a member of the Association for the Preservation of the Eastern Shore.

Formed in February, the group opposes fish farming on the Eastern Shore, and in fact, is calling for a province-wide moratorium on fish farm licenses.

(More than 50 organizations – spanning from tourism outfitters to environmental groups – have placed their name on a letter to Premier Darrell Dexter, calling for a moratorium on further open pen salmon aquaculture.)

Cope says she fears the use of pesticides and the build up of fecal matter in nearby waters. And she wonders about the potential impact on the Eastern Shore's "vibrant" lobster fishery.

"We think this ecosystem will probably sustain these farms for a few years and then collapse. Then they'll move on somewhere else," she says, pointing to Chile as an example of boom and bust aquaculture.

In 2007, an epidemic of Infectious Salmon Anemia destroyed 75 per cent of Chile's salmon farming industry. (New Brunswick's [Cooke Aquaculture](#) recently confirmed an [ISA outbreak](#) at one of its Shelburne, N.S. fish farms).

"Without further safeguards, we believe there's likely to be harm to the economic activities and ecology of this shore," Cope said.

Her concerns are echoed in a 2010 report penned by the [Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform](#)—a group that includes the [David Suzuki Foundation](#).

"Net-cage salmon farming is currently one of the most harmful aquaculture production systems," states [the report](#).

"Farm waste and chemicals such as antibiotics and pesticides pass through the cages into surrounding waters, harming other marine life. The high densities of fish and exposure to pathogens create breeding grounds for disease and parasites."

But Shane Borthwick, who is managing Snow Island's Eastern Shore operations, says local residents need not fear the arrival of fish farming.

Borthwick personally oversaw the raising of salmon at Owls' Head in 2008. That crop, he says, was free of disease and sea lice, a parasite that is often treated with pesticides. "We've demonstrated what can be done," he says.

According to Borthwick, Snow Island will be raising no more than 500,000 salmon per farm. In all, it takes about two and a half years to raise and fully harvest a crop of fish. After the harvest, each fish farm will lie fallow (unused) for 18 months.

“After one year of fallow, it’s as if we were never there,” he says.

Borthwick, the son of a southern New Brunswick lobster fisherman, expects to hire up to 20 workers this year.

“This is a multi-million dollar investment,” he says. “The Eastern Shore is not a highly developed area and there has been a lot of outmigration and business closures. There’s a great need for jobs to keep young families there.”

Sheet Harbour resident Tom McInnis understands the area’s economic challenges as well as anyone. A long-time provincial cabinet minister, McInnis now heads the [Sheet Harbour and Area Chamber of Commerce](#). “Jobs would be great, but not at any cost,” he says.

McInnis was one of an estimated 400 people who attended a Feb. 6 public information meeting at the Sheet Harbour Legion.

The session, hosted by the provincial Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, failed to quell the concerns of local residents, he says.

One of McInnis’ big concerns is the local shellfish industry, which includes lobster and snow crab. Any harm to that sector would have a “catastrophic affect” on the local economy, he argues.

In addition to a moratorium, McInnis is calling for an independent study of the open pen aquaculture industry.

“I’ve become convinced that there are too many questions here,” he says. “For the province to go ahead with this would be callous disregard for the feelings of the people of this region.”

Local municipal councilor Steve Streach is also calling for the province to shelve Snow Island Salmon’s proposal.

“There are not enough checks and balances,” he said, noting there is “strong” resistance to the fish farms proposed for his riding.

“I would hate to see us move in that direction for commercial purposes—and for the sake of a few jobs—without making sure that we have done our very best... to protect the natural habitat,” he added. “Jobs are one thing, but selling your soul is another.”

A recent report from the [Atlantic Provinces Economic Council](#) outlined the significant economic impact of the region’s aquaculture industry.

“Aquaculture is the fastest growing source of food production in the world, with Atlantic Canada riding the wave of growth in this industry,” the report stated.

Overall, the Atlantic aquaculture industry accounted for nearly 2,500 direct jobs in 2007, mostly in rural areas with high unemployment.

Cooke Aquaculture is now pushing forward with a \$150-million expansion of its Nova Scotia operations. The expansion is expected to create over 400 jobs, mainly in rural southwestern Nova region.

Back on the Eastern Shore, Shane Borthwick believes Snow Island's four-farm operation will create the same type of economic boost.

"I'm not ignoring the fact that there are issues with this industry. But we are encouraging people to look at our model," he says.

"This will be done in a very sustainable way. There will be a net benefit."