

PUBLICATION: **Times Colonist (Victoria)**

DATE: **2009.01.10**

PAGE: A3

COLUMN: Jack Knox

West coast trollers take biggest hit in salmon treaty; Goal of new Canada-U.S. deal is to conserve endangered stocks

Ucluelet's Mike Smith has no doubt about what the new U.S.-Canada salmon treaty means to trollers on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

"It's pretty much the end of us," he says. "They gave away all our fish, eh?"

That leaves the 62-year-old with a salmon licence he can't use and a 41-foot boat, the Blue Eagle One, that's really not much good for anything else.

Canada figured it got a pretty sweet deal this week when it renewed the Pacific Salmon Treaty for another 10 years. We're giving up roughly the same number of chinook as the Americans, but getting the U.S. to throw in \$30 million as part of the bargain, all in the name of sustainability. The idea is to conserve endangered stocks, the ones that pass through Alaska waters en route to B.C. and the ones that swim down the outside of the Island on the way to the U.S.

The problem for guys like Smith, the trollers whose licences confine them to the Island's west coast, is they're taking the biggest hit, their chinook catch reduced by half. Sports fishermen aren't being cut back. The net fleet will be relatively unscathed.

Smith says the loss of the chinook is enough to scuttle the trollers, the stubby little hook-and-line boats long synonymous with the coast. They haven't been allowed to catch coho for a dozen years, and have only had a shot at sockeye once since 2002.

Only 162 trollers remain of the 1,800 that plied the west coast of Vancouver Island prior to a federal licence buy-back program in the mid-1990s; the promise to those who hung in was that they would have access to enough fish to make a living, but it hasn't worked out that way.

"We haven't been viable for years, really," says Smith. The only guys left fishing are the grey hairs who had already paid for their boats and licences -- permits worth as much as \$250,000 just a few years ago. Smith figures the latest development is just the government's way of pushing the survivors over the cliff.

That might be a justifiable sacrifice if it led to the recovery of the species. We keep hearing doomsday tales about the decline of the chinook, the favourite food of endangered orcas that are now starving to death. The salmon collapse threatens the ecology of the entire coast.

But trollers figure they're just the scapegoat, that the chinook allowed to escape here will only be caught in the United States.

Besides, Smith says the real problem isn't overfishing but the destruction of freshwater habitat by logging and urbanization. Chinook stocks won't recover unless government addresses that and breeds more hatchery fish, too.

Kathy Scarfo, who speaks for the trollers association, is ticked. She says the government promised the new salmon treaty would be debated in Parliament before being signed, but that never happened. An entire way of life vanishes with a stroke of the pen and nobody says a word.

The ripples go well beyond the trollers; fuel docks disappear, fish processors lose their profit margin, the infrastructure that props up the rest of the commercial fishery is weakened. If this isn't handled well, the west coast troll fleet might be down to 20 boats.

The question now is what the feds plan to do for compensation. That \$30 million from the U.S. is supposed to pay Canadian fishermen for the loss of chinook, but the Department of Fisheries and Oceans says the details will only be worked out after consultation with stakeholders. S

Scarfo has heard talk of Ottawa buying back licences for \$100,000 to \$135,000 each, but says that's peanuts compared to what the trollers have invested, let alone the loss of future income. That \$30 million won't be enough.

But DFO says it was thrilled to see that \$30 million squeezed out of the Americans, thought it a pretty significant gain at the bargaining table. Don't hold your breath waiting for Ottawa to add to the pot, not in this economy. And by the way, that \$30 million will only come in over two years, beginning in 2010.

None of which does much today for the likes of Mike Smith, the once-ubiquitous trollers now disappearing faster than the chinook salmon they used to chase.