

Kamloops This Week

Sockeye go the witness stand

By Tom Fletcher - Kamloops This Week

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Prime Minister

Stephen Harper's decision to have a judicial inquiry into the sockeye salmon crisis has the potential to do more than enrich some lawyers.

It's a critical time for West Coast fisheries management.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada is taking over supervision of salmon farms from B.C.

The Yale treaty in the Fraser Canyon is about to be signed, a controversial step in the division of the Fraser River fishery among 94 aboriginal bands who claim a share.

Another landmark decision has just come down in B.C. Supreme Court, upholding the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples' aboriginal right to catch and sell any species of fish in their western Vancouver Island territory, whether Ottawa's rules allow it or not.

And all this is unfolding in the aftermath of what may be the worst collapse ever of B.C.'s sockeye salmon runs.

Fisheries and Oceans and the Canada-U.S. Pacific Salmon Commission told fishing groups this spring they could expect a huge run of 8.7-million mid-summer sockeye to return to the Fraser River.

That would have been plenty for commercial and aboriginal fisheries.

As it turned out, 93 per cent of those fish never returned, the second major run collapse in three years.

Only 600,000 made it back from the Pacific and some of the province's lake and stream systems were all but devoid of bright-red spawners this

fall.

Already some are constructing a familiar narrative around evil salmon farms and their deadly sea lice, which have now supposedly wiped out the sockeye after years of false alarms about pink salmon.

The ridiculousness of this trumped-up assault on salmon farming is finally being revealed and the judicial inquiry represents an opportunity to bury it for good.

Last week, I mentioned the millions poured into this campaign by U.S. private foundations and carried out in part by PCB alarmist David Suzuki and sea-louse queen Alexandra Morton.

I asked Morton last week to account for the more than half a million dollars her B.C.-based Raincoast Research Foundation apparently accepted to help carry out the U.S. groups' explicit project to push salmon farms out of business.

I suppose, because I'm in the media, Morton didn't respond with a personal attack on my motives.

Instead, she was politely evasive about what American money she took and what she agreed to do for it. She did acknowledge the influence of U.S. foundations in B.C., however.

"I left the Coalition for Aquaculture Reform two years ago because U.S. funding was pushing the groups to work closely with the fish farmers and this meant agreeing to expansion of fish farms in the Broughton," Morton told me by e-mail.

"I refused to agree with that and left. While I was with the coalition, I stretched the funds to do an enormous amount of research and published it."

Note she suggests "U.S. funding" is manipulating both sides.

Note also she accepts no compromise on her conclusion fish farms are the root of all evil in the Pacific.

She "stretched the funds" to find any plausible way to blame sea lice for everything, including some far-fetched computer models produced recently by that great salmon think-tank — the University of Alberta.

Last week, I suggested that salmon ranching flooding the wild ocean habitat with hatchery-reared fish should be examined as well.

Alaska alone releases 1.5-billion fish a year.

Since then, I've heard from several experts with real credentials, from Alaska, Hawaii, Chile and from ocean scientists here in B.C., that this is a long overdue step.

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