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Where have all the Fraser sockeye gone? Judge will hear evidence

You may recall the DFO estimated the Fraser River sockeye run at 10.6 million fish and that it collapsed to 1.37 million this past summer.

Paul Sproat, head guy in B.C., issued a note in the Globe and Mail saying it sure wasn't fish farm sea lice killing the fry on their way to sea. He and the DFO are the only people in B.C. who think that. Such comments are disingenuous because Minister Gail Shea was in Norway trying to woo more Norwegian fish farms to B.C., something that to anyone who knows anything about Pacific salmon seems appallingly out of touch. I am aware of four different DFO scientists that either left DFO for its mismanagement, or took early retirement and then strongly criticized their former employer.

To be fair, there are several plausible explanations: river temperature, river pollution and unfavourable Georgia Strait water conditions. Here is the evidence. In 2007 the huge outgoing cohort had among it 139 million fry from the Chilko and Quesnel alone. DFO has not been forthcoming about revealing their own net seines for fry in 2007 found only 157 Chilko fry in Georgia Strait. This strongly suggests that an in-river kill may well have been the cause -- because of higher temperatures. At 18.8 C the Fraser temperature was just below where adult sockeye begin dying. But predators in the Strait of Georgia now include a large, growing population of hake and pollock. Living at more than 100 metres down, though, they are probably far below the plankton-feeding sockeye that have to congregate near the surface for feeding.

But by the time the fry hit Campbell River it is pretty clear that fish farm sea lice killed them. At 28 sea lice on average per sockeye fry, that would kill every one that migrated up Johnstone Strait. But sockeye also move out to the Pacific through Juan de Fuca where there are no fish farms. This suggests that more Fraser sockeye should have come back than the numbers that did, hence low ocean survival may also be a culprit. Then there is the sticky issue that the Harrison River sockeye (part of the Fraser run) came back in buoyant numbers later in the summer. This tends to weaken the low ocean survival theory because they, too, should not have survived.

But one of the real stories is that the DFO knew the fry were in short supply in 2007, after the seine tests, a full two years before the collapse took place. In the face of this knowledge, they should have issued a low sockeye number. Fortunately enough, B.C. residents, environmentalists, commercial, sport and aboriginal fishing sectors and media have complained so much that Stephen Harper announced a judicial review into this subject to release its final report in spring 2011.

Some terms of reference have been revealed and Bruce Cohen, a B.C. Supreme Court judge with some experience in sustainable industry, is now setting up shop for an inquiry. He has the power to compel someone to give evidence and be truthful. That means DFO staff are somewhat protected in the course of testifying. A whole lot more scientists will come forward, and others. Cohen's interim report is due in summer 2010.

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