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Whatever side of the table you sit on, accountability is always good

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Oh boy, there's gonna be a salmon inquisition.

The recently announced judicial inquiry into the disappearance of most of the Fraser River sockeye this past year is good news for salmon lovers everywhere.

It is time, before we kiss this resource goodbye like the cod on the East Coast, to have a real look at what's going on.

One body that may not come out smelling like a rose is the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

The DFO is supposed to be a strictly science-based manager of the waters that lap at this great country. As with most organizations that are part of a national government, it's inevitable that politics get mixed in with their duties. The next you thing you know, decisions are being made on an economic basis, or even worse, on an election basis.

It has already been revealed that DFO was told to not only allow, but to promote fish farming on the B.C. coast. That should never really be the role of the agency tasked with protecting fish stocks, not only for feeding the human population, but to maintain ecosystem functionality and for their intrinsic value.

The good news is that the disappearance of about nine million of a forecasted run of 10 million sockeye has motivated people on all sides of the table to find answers to the mystery.

There have been inquiries into salmon stocks before but they were initiated by DFO itself, with no oversight to ensure all witnesses and documents were provided.

This time, the letter calling for Justice Bruce Cohen to hear evidence on the case of the missing fish comes from the Prime Minister's Office. The judge will have the authority to compel witnesses to testify under oath. There's a very real possibility that this will make public management decisions that have had nothing to do with protecting stocks.

There are many dedicated professional people who work at DFO and with salmon specifically. But as we've seen with these sprawling federal departments, good people who want to reveal bad news are often muzzled or fired.

The other stakeholders in this issue decided some time ago that protecting this resource is about more than fighting for their piece of the pie.

In Port Alberni, commercial fishermen, recreational fishers, First Nations and scientists sit down at a round table each year to discuss what's happening with the salmon runs in these parts.

It's not all perfect harmony but it's a far cry from when DFO used to deal with each group behind closed doors, pitted groups against each other and had everyone going for maximum allowances so they didn't get edged out by other interest groups.

The judicial inquiry is expected to take until August to complete with the full report due by May 2011. That's two more years of waiting for improved practices and two more runs of salmon that may or may not appear.

Fortunately, those interest groups that have become more co-operative are not waiting around for the inquiry to fix things. They want to keep working on the independent science that might explain why B.C. salmon headed for the Fraser River collapsed while other runs that co-mingle in the same ocean conditions did not.

According to Phil Eidsvik, of B.C. Fisheries Survival Coalition, runs from Alaska, Washington and even Russia did not suffer the high mortality seen in the Fraser sockeye.

That has some people pointing to one obvious difference: those salmon don't swim past fish farms on their way out as smolts or as they return to spawn in their natal rivers as adults.

Whatever comes of the inquiry, it appears the alarm has been sounded. This should be good news for people everywhere who

want to see Pacific salmon protected so they don't go the way of Atlantic cod.

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