

B.C. judge to head inquiry into salmon collapse

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VANCOUVER — Find out what happened. That was the advice East Coast cod fisherman had Friday for those affected by the collapse of the Fraser River sockeye salmon fishery this year.

The federal government has announced a no-holds-barred inquiry into the stock failure and some affected by the collapse of Atlantic cod stocks in the early 1990s say that just might avert the kind of upheaval that washed over the East Coast.

Atlantic fishermen say they've never gotten a satisfactory answer about the root of their own crisis.

But B.C. Supreme Court Justice Bruce Cohen has been appointed by the federal government to conduct a sweeping judicial inquiry into failure of the West Coast sockeye fishery this year.

"The best time to plant a tree was four years ago, but the next best time to do it is today. The fact we have it now, I think we should embrace it and try to make the best of it," said Bill Broderick, of St. Brendan's in Bonavista, Nfld., whose ground fish operation was turned upside down when the Northern cod stocks vanished.

"People (in Newfoundland) made some pretty important decisions in their lives that they probably would have made differently had they known the true consequence."

People held false hope for too long, said Broderick, now a spokesman for the Fish, Food and Allied Workers of Newfoundland after 25 years in his fifth-generation operation. He's hoping the government's swifter response to the loss of millions of sockeye -- estimates predicted as many as 10.5 million fish would return to spawn this year, as opposed to the meagre 1.37 million that showed up-- will salvage livelihoods down the line.

It remains to be seen whether the stock failure this year is an anomaly or a stark new reality for B.C. salmon fishermen.

But it forced the closure of commercial sockeye fisheries and aboriginal food fisheries for Fraser River-based First Nations that depend on sockeye to supplement their diet over the winter.

Cohen will have the power to compel testimony and ultimately could make recommendations on the policies and procedures of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Trade Minister Stockwell Day, the regional minister for B.C., told reporters in Vancouver Friday that the government is concerned and hopes Cohen will find answers.

He suggested they would but did not commit the federal government to following through on the inquiry recommendations.

"Any government that would launch something and then not take a serious look at it, of course, would raise questions," he said.

"We are very serious about finding out the reasons."

Fisheries and Oceans is committed to co-operating with the proceedings, said Bonnie Antcliffe, acting regional director, Fisheries and Aquaculture Management.

"We do recognize the importance of sockeye to the First Nations, to commercial harvesters, to the recreational sector, B.C. economy, and all Canadians," she said in a prepared statement.

George Rose, head of Fisheries Conservation at the Marine Institute of Memorial University, lauded the move.

The failure of the sockeye was unpredicted and had a negative impact, he said.

"From that point of view, it's something that we really need to find out about, so if there is a way to prevent that from happening in the future (we will)," he said.

"Maybe there is something we can do, maybe there is something fundamentally at fault here that could be turned around, or, at least we should know about if it can't be turned around."

While the crises do differ considerably -- cod and salmon share no match in how they live, spawn, or the rate of their decline -- the two share an elevated level of importance in their respective province, and disappeared on a large scale in a quick and unexpected way, Rose said.

"It kind of kicks people in the gut when these cultural icons fall," he said.

Following the cod collapse, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, as well as several universities, launched science programs meant to get answers, but without a truly comprehensive explanation. That's why Rose supports the government action now.

"It may be (the salmon collapse) was a total anomaly ... we just don't know right now," Rose said. "You're kind of swinging in the dark. But it's the kind of thing we really need to know if we care about sustaining the fisheries and those fish."

Some biologists say disease from salmon farms is the root of the problem, but there are a host of suspect causes, ranging from climate change to a changing food supply. Suspected factors for the cod collapse 20 years ago included overfishing by foreign and domestic fleets, poor environmental conditions and stock overestimations.

Cohen is expected to produce an interim report by August of next year and a final report by May 2011.

Many critics of federal Fisheries policy on the West Coast have welcomed the inquiry, but federal New Democrat fisheries critic Peter Julian said the government needs to take action right away to save next year's sockeye run.

"Our salmon stocks in British Columbia have been neglected for far too long. We need increased funding; we need DFO to move its management here to British Columbia. We cannot have, I believe, salmon being managed from an office building in Ottawa," Julian said outside the room where Day made the announcement. He was barred from entry to the news conference.

Julian said a complete overhaul of the fisheries situation in B.C. is needed to make sure the salmon don't go the way of Atlantic cod.

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