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***Justice Cowan to head up sockeye probe; Interim federal inquiry report must be submitted by Aug. 1***

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British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Bruce Cohen will chair a federal commission of inquiry into the collapse of Fraser River sockeye salmon runs, Trade Minister Stockwell Day announced yesterday in Vancouver.

Day said Cohen will have the broadest possible latitude to ask questions and to enable intervenors to participate in the inquiry.

This past summer the Department of Fisheries and Oceans closed the Fraser to commercial fishing for the third consecutive year after DFO predictions of a sockeye run exceeding 10 million fish failed to materialize and only a vestigial run of about a million fish migrated back to the river to spawn.

"Justice Cohen's mandate will be to investigate and report on the reasons for the decline of sockeye salmon in the Fraser River," said a news release from Prime Minister Stephen Harper's office.

Cohen has been appointed as Commissioner under Part One of the Inquiries Act, "with all the powers set out in the Act, including the authority to hold hearings, summon witnesses and gather evidence needed to conduct the inquiry," the release said.

The only apparent constraint is that hearings not take place during the 2010 Olympics and Paralympics in Vancouver. Cohen must submit an interim report to the federal government by

Aug. 1, 2010, and the final report by May 1, 2011.

Documents show that while the Department of Fisheries and Oceans was officially predicting strong sockeye returns and a commercial fishing opportunity for Fraser sockeye in 2009, others at DFO were warning of a probable collapse based on grim results in ocean test-fishing programs dating back to 2007.

B.C. New Democrat and Liberal MPs, First Nations, commercial and sport fishing groups, conservation groups and local governments have all been calling on the government for

action, but until Harper's announcement there was no evidence that the Tories intended to respond.

The reason for the decline remains a mystery, although poor marine survival rates among juvenile salmon migrating into the ocean for the first time appear to be the principal culprit.

Climate change affecting ocean temperature, declining ocean salinity, dwindling food resources and health threats from fish farms along salmon migration routes have been suggested as possible explanations -- but the official position of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans is that no specific cause is known.

Chief Bob Chamberlin, secretary treasurer of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, called Harper's announcement "excellent news."

"I think it's crucial that they release a complete understanding of what happened with the sockeye collapse here on the West Coast," Chamberlin said.

He wants the inquiry to look at sea lice infestations and disease transfer from salmon farms to juvenile wild salmon.

"I would urge the prime minister to make the necessary resources available for intervenors to participate. If not, you'll have well-resourced industries like fish farms participate and put their spin on things, and other people who could inform the whole process will be excluded."

Craig Orr, executive director of Watershed Watch Salmon Society, wants the inquiry to look at the "disconnect" between DFO researchers who warned in 2007 of the pending collapse based on an absence of juvenile 2009-class Fraser sockeye in ocean test fishing, and DFO's "rosy" pre-season forecasts for the 2009 sockeye Fraser return.

"An inquiry should allow them to compel testimony from the managers and the scientists, which is good," Orr said.

Commercial gillnetter and troller Rick Burns, who abandoned the Fraser in favour of fishing the north B.C. coast four years ago, said he's "all for" the inquiry and said it needs to be a "far-ranging inquiry because there are so many factors that affect salmon."

Phil Eidsvik, of the B.C. Fisheries Survival Coalition, said the inquiry is "great news for B.C. salmon.

"I couldn't be more pleased. We have been asking for a full judicial inquiry into the management of Fraser salmon since 1992," Eidsvik said.

"Harper has shown that he understands how important salmon is to B.C. and is putting his government under a microscope to ensure that B.C. salmon don't go the way of Atlantic cod."