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Inquiry to fry biggest fish as it takes stock of sockeye decline; DFO faces intense scrutiny over farms, conflict of interest

There's no doubt the Department of Fisheries and Oceans is going to be one of the biggest fish flopping nervously on the dissection table once Justice Bruce Cohen's federal judicial inquiry into the decline of Fraser River sockeye salmon begins early next year.

Formal announcement of the long-sought inquiry was announced in Vancouver on Friday by federal Trade Minister Stockwell Day, the Okanagan-Coquihalla MP who is also the lead minister in B.C. for Stephen Harper's government.

The key point here is that unlike previous inquiries into the decline of Fraser River sockeye stocks, this one has real teeth.

The terms of reference assigned to Cohen by Ottawa are the broadest possible and include powers of subpoena, which means witnesses will be ordered to appear and must testify under oath.

Given the high level of politics that has played havoc for years with federal fisheries management on both coasts, a full commission of inquiry is the only sensible way we'll ever have a hope of learning why the Fraser's sockeye are disappearing.

And full marks to the Prime Minister for having the fortitude to order such an inquiry. In all likelihood, it will uncover some very nasty-looking warts in one of his government's departments.

Politics aside, the real beneficiary should be the fish. The cause of their demise -- this past summer only 600,000 sockeye returned from a forecast 8.7 million fish in the midsummer run alone -- is long and complex. But management by DFO here on B.C.'s coast has long been cited as one of the primary contributing factors, because neighbouring sockeye jurisdictions in Alaska and Washington have not experienced similar drastic declines.

If some unknown environmental factors are killing Fraser River sockeye out in the Pacific, why aren't they impacting the same species to the north and south of us?

Another key focus in this inquiry will be the salmon farms on our coast and their suspected impact on wild stocks through sea-lice infestations. There's a connection here with DFO as well.

"We think DFO has conflicting mandates to promote salmon farming and wild-salmon stocks at the same time," says Craig Orr, executive director of the nonprofit Watershed Watch Salmon Society.

"In fact, the auditor-general has twice cited DFO for being in this conflict of interest, but this inquiry also has to look at all the potential causes and factors, as well as the science surrounding the sockeye disappearance."

Adds John Cummins, the Conservative MP (Delta-Richmond East) and a former commercial fisherman who was instrumental in launching this inquiry: "The consensus is that DFO is dysfunctional and that it's time to turn the spotlight on what it's been doing."

He says Cohen's recommendations may have a broader influence on an overhaul of the Fisheries Act that is being planned.

Cummins says Vancouver-born Cohen was chosen to head the inquiry because he "has an ability to think outside the box."

Cohen will submit an interim report on or before Aug. 1, 2010. The final report is due by May 1, 2011.