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Cohen Hires DFO Fisheries Manager to Access DFO

Delta, B.C. – “The Cohen Inquiry has contracted Bert Lonson, former media spokesman for DFO and manager of aboriginal fisheries, to be part of its *science research program*,” said John Cummins, M.P. (Delta-Richmond East).

On August 17, 2010 the Inquiry announced that it was “contracting with qualified and experienced external scientific researchers to study a wide range of technical and scientific issues.” The researchers, it said, were “chosen for their academic credentials, professional publications, professional reputation, practical experience, recognized expertise and knowledge relevant to Fraser River sockeye.”

Lonson will work with Mike Staley, a Cheam fishery advisor, on *Project 11 – Fraser River Salmon: Status of DFO Science and Management*, “to assess DFO management and science expenditures over time as they relate to Fraser sockeye salmon.”

Lonson headed DFO’s aboriginal fisheries branch at a formative period, playing a key role in developing its fishing policy and establishing and managing the very fisheries linked to problems in catch reporting, unauthorized and unmonitored fishing and illegal sales.

DFO records reveal that Lonson had been advised by DFO enforcement that the aboriginal catch data provided to DFO was “poor at best and should not be used to make fisheries management decisions.”

In 2005, as regional salmon manager, Lonson testified before the sockeye review panel headed by former Chief Justice Brian Williams in 2005 and argued that it would be an infringement of an aboriginal’s right if he were required to report on how many fish he had caught. Justice Williams who was well aware of problems in the management of the aboriginal fishery cautioned Lonson that the courts had never said that “you can’t ask a fisherman how many fish he’s caught.” Even after the caution from the judge, Lonson stood fast to the view that “it would be an infringement on a person to make sure that he fills out a specific piece of paper” and sends it in to DFO.

DFO awarded Lonson its “Communications Distinction Award for Media Spokesman of the Year” in 2007. The Department said that he “consistently conveyed the Department’s messages on salmon” and had “a significant and positive impact on Pacific Region’s relations and public awareness activities.” “Bert Lonson was Mr. DFO,” said Cummins.

Even after his retirement from DFO in 2007 he continued to do work for the Department on Catch Monitoring Standards in the Commercial Fishery. In 2009 he received a contract from the Department valued at \$25,000.

Putting aside whether or not Lonson is qualified to undertake scientific research, it is clear that his long working relationship with DFO as a fisheries manager, he does not come to his work at the Cohen Inquiry with clean hands.

“It is akin to giving the fox a contract to explain the management and disappearance of the chickens” said Cummins.

Bert Lonson was for many years the architect of the Department’s troubled aboriginal fisheries program who believed that aboriginal fishermen should not be required to report to the Department on how many fish they had caught and later came to be the recognized public face of the Department in British Columbia.

“Bert Lonson, like Brian Riddell, must be called to give testimony. It is ridiculous for the Inquiry to rely on a former senior DFO official awarded by his Department for his ability in delivering the Department’s message to now access DFO’s management and science,” concluded Cummins.

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