

BC Local News

## **B.C. judge to head federal missing salmon probe**

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The collapse of this year's Fraser River sockeye salmon run will be the focus of a judicial inquiry ordered by the federal Conservative government.

More than nine million salmon expected to head up the Fraser River this summer failed to arrive.

Just 1.37 million sockeye did return to the Fraser – a tiny fraction of the 10.6 million predicted in advance.

It was the worst sockeye return on record, even more dismal than the two previous very weak seasons that kept commercial fishing boats tied up.

Possible explanations range from ecological catastrophe to the impacts of fish farms along the B.C. coast.

The inquiry will be headed by B.C. Supreme Court Justice Bruce Cohen.

He is to examine the causes of the collapse, including but not limited to "environmental factors, aquaculture, predators, diseases, water temperature" and other factors that may have kept juvenile sockeye from reaching the ocean or adults from returning to spawn.

The inquiry is to report back with recommendations by May 1, 2011.

"Our government is deeply concerned about the low returns of sockeye salmon to the Fraser River and the implications for the fishery," international trade minister Stockwell Day said Friday.

The announcement came after weeks of calls for action from First Nation leaders and others.

Opposition critics had accused the federal fisheries minister of saying little and doing nothing about the missing salmon.

"It's long overdue," said Alex Rose, the West Vancouver author of a recent book on

Canadian fishery collapses.

"We need to put people under oath and on the record because otherwise I am extremely concerned that our wild salmon stocks are going the way of the Grand Banks cod."

Stó:lō Tribal Council Grand Chief Clarence Penner said aboriginal bands up and down the Fraser had been promised a banner year for sockeye.

"Along with our fishermen, we are in the dark as to why the sockeye runs didn't make it back to the river," Penner said. "We are still looking for the answers and this is why we support a judicial inquiry."

Over half of B.C.'s aboriginal population lives in the Fraser watershed and the survival of the sockeye is crucial to them, he said.

"Unless we can figure out what is at the bottom of the failed sockeye runs and take corrective action, we are likely to witness more sockeye seasons like 2009."

Delta-Richmond East Conservative MP John Cummins, a former commercial fisherman, said the sockeye fishery on the Fraser has now been closed six out of the last 11 years.

Cummins said the issue goes beyond old disputes over who gets what share of the catch.

"Clear warning signs of an impending environmental disaster are evident," he said. "It now is the very survival of the species that is at risk."