

**PUBLICATION:** Times Colonist (Victoria)

**DATE:** 2009.08.25

**EDITION:** Final

**SECTION:** Comment

---

## **Action now on wild salmon**

---

The collapse of the Fraser River sockeye salmon run this year should be a wake-up call to the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans that its management plans are simply not working.

Unfortunately, DFO has shown no indication that it understands the depth of the problem, even as fewer than 20 per cent of the anticipated Fraser run have returned this year.

The Pacific Salmon Commission now forecasts 1.7 million sockeye will return to spawn in the Vancouver-area watershed this summer, compared to DFO's pre-season estimate of 10.4 million fish.

Given that other West Coast sockeye runs have thrived this year, as have catches of some other salmon species, there is clearly a problem for the Fraser run in particular.

But what is the cause?

No one knows -- least of all DFO. The salmon commission points to "poor ocean survival," since healthy out-migrations of fry from the river were observed four years ago when the run left the Fraser, but that rather generic term does little to isolate the reason for the shortfall.

Environmentalists have charged that the commercial fish farms in the Broughton Archipelago, which the young salmon pass on their way to the ocean, might have infected them with parasitic sea lice. Despite attempts by fish farm operators to reduce the impact of sea lice on passing wild salmon, studies have indicated a correlation between the operations and infection of wild stocks.

Other theories have suggested climate change could be affecting the sockeye's food supply or that rising temperatures in the Fraser could be a factor.

More studies are needed, but immediate, serious work on a transition to closed-containment systems in the fish farms is clearly desirable, both to eliminate escapes of farmed fish and to reduce levels of sea lice, antibiotics and other undesirable side effects. Yet almost three years after an all-party legislative committee called for a provincially supported closed containment pilot project, little has happened.

A Supreme Court decision in February transferred responsibility for fish farms from the province to the federal government. That decision, pending an appeal from one aquaculture company, set a deadline of next February for action.

DFO should not wait that long. A moratorium on fish-farm expansion and work on transition to closed containment should be in the works now, along with studies to determine if other factors we can control are to blame.

Salmon represent more than just dinner -- they are a vital part of the ocean ecosystem and a keystone to our marine economy. We must do everything in our power to understand the forces threatening their populations, and fix them where we can.

By falling short in that part of its mandate, DFO is failing both salmon and the British Columbians who depend on the Fraser fishery. The department must do more before it's too late.