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# Harper announces probe

Judicial inquiry will examine the collapse of Fraser River sockeye

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It has taken four years, and the virtual collapse of a fishery, but Prime Minister Stephen Harper is now making good on a promise to probe the problems with the Fraser River salmon fishery.

Harper announced Thursday he will strike a judicial inquiry to probe the disappearance of millions of Fraser River sockeye.

"As the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans has said on numerous occasions, we are very concerned about the low and falling returns of sockeye salmon in British Columbia," Harper said in the House of Commons Thursday.

The announcment was praised by Conservative MP John Cummins (Delta-Richmond East), who has been one of his own government's fiercest critics on the fisheries portfolio.

"Fraser sockeye must not be allowed to go the way of the Atlantic cod," Cummins said in a press release.

"The announcement of this judicial inquiry shows a prime minister committed to resolving this environmental challenge to the Fraser River sockeye and taking the necessary steps so that it is again the world's greatest sockeye river."

Harper promised a judicial inquiry in 2006, after millions of fish went missing during the 2004 return.

The 2009 run was expected to be robust, with 10.5 million fish expected to return to local waters.

Less than two million returned. That devastating result came on the heels of several years in which commercial fishermen were

shut out of the once-lucrative fishery.

This year, even native fishermen, who get first dibs on sockeye to meet their food, social and ceremonial requirements, did not get their usual allotments.

Cummins, an Area E gillnet licence holder, warns that "a disaster of epic proportions on the Fraser" is on the horizon if drastic steps are not taken.

In six out of the last eleven years, the sockeye fishery has been closed to commercial fishermen, Cummins said.

Ocean temperatures have been blamed for the recent poor returns of sockeye. Meanwhile, sockeye in Alaska returned in record numbers this year.

Cummins recently said he is swayed by theories that sea lice and other diseases from fish farms lining the B.C. coast may be a major cause of high mortality among young salmon as they make their way from local rivers to the Strait of Georgia.

It is a theory dismissed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which critics say is in a conflict of interest, since it is mandated from above to promote fish farming.

Earlier this year, while commercial fishermen based in Steveston were witnessing a disaster, federal Fisheries Minister Gail Shea was in Norway promoting B.C. to the fish farming industry.

Cummins has been pushing for a judicial inquiry since 2004. He said only under such an inquiry can DFO scientists and managers provide key testimony without fear of repercussion.

"If we are to avert an environmental catastrophe on the Fraser, we must be able to find out what happened and to ensure that mistakes are not repeated," Cummins said. "Only a judicial inquiry will get the job done."

Ottawa is expected to announce who will head the inquiry today (Friday).

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