

PUBLICATION: The Province

DATE: 2009.11.06

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: A10

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PM calls judicial inquiry into B.C. sockeye stocks; Inquiry to report back to gov't by May 2011

The shocking sockeye salmon saga shall soon be studied.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced Thursday that a judicial inquiry will investigate the decline in sockeye stocks.

"We are very concerned about the low and falling returns of sockeye salmon in British Columbia," Harper said in the House of Commons.

Trade Minister Stockwell Day will flesh out the announcement in Vancouver today, but Harper said the inquiry will have the legal power to compel witnesses to testify and will report back to government by May 2011.

"The establishment of a judicial inquiry into the management of the Fraser River sockeye fishery gives new hope for the future of a great salmon river," said Conservative MP John Cummins (Delta-Richmond East).

"Fraser sockeye must not be allowed to go the way of the Atlantic cod."

Warm water temperatures, an extended drought and low river levels are all suspected following a disastrous season when just 1,723 tonnes of sockeye were harvested, down from 8,800 tonnes in 2000.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans estimated that 10.5 million sockeye would return to B.C. this year. But only 1.3 million appeared.

Some compare the precipitous decline to that of the once-abundant cod stocks on Canada's Atlantic Coast, now essentially fished out.

"Our sockeye are at the moment of no return," said biologist Alexandra Morton. "If there had been a judicial inquiry into management of our North Atlantic cod stocks, scientists would have been allowed to speak earlier and we would still have those fish stocks.

"Wild salmon are not just a pretty fish. They are food, a climate stabilization mechanism, an economic powerhouse, and a national treasure. They belong to us."

B.C. fishermen are perplexed by the disappearance, suggesting the decline is due to overfishing, to federal conservation policies or to a natural disaster.

Officials with the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans have been zeroing in on climate change as a contributing factor, which has warmed up the normally cool Fraser River.

The temperature of the Fraser River in August was 18.8 C, a full 1.1 degrees warmer than the historical average.

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