

**PUBLICATION:** The Province  
**DATE:** 2009.10.11  
**EDITION:** Final  
**SECTION:** News  
**PAGE:** A12  
**COLUMN:** The Fraser Valley  
**BYLINE:** Brian Lewis

---

## **Hold DFO accountable for collapse of sockeye; Federal judicial inquiry demanded by different groups**

---

It's not hard to see why increasing numbers of stakeholders say Ottawa has salmon eggs all over its face when it comes to declining Fraser River sockeye stocks.

For the past three years, overly optimistic estimates of how many mature sockeye will return to spawn has turned into disappointing real numbers.

This year, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans estimated that 10.5 million sockeye would return home to spawn.

But only about 1.3 million came back, thus extending an even longer trend in declining sockeye numbers that began in the early 1990s.

Consequently, those who have a primary stake in Fraser sockeye -- the commercial, recreational and aboriginal fishing sectors -- are demanding Ottawa hold a full judicial inquiry into the declines.

Fraser River commercial gillnet fishermen were among the first to issue the call, stating that Prime Minister Stephen Harper must keep his 2006 election campaign promise to hold such an inquiry.

"DFO's epic mismanagement of Fraser sockeye has been regularly covered up and it's long past time we got some honest answers," said gillnet spokesman Bob McKamey.

The Sto:lo Tribal Council joined that call.

"Our ancient dry-rack camps in the Fraser Canyon fell silent this summer, canning jars were put away empty, and freezers are devoid of sockeye," said grand chief Clarence Pennier in a letter to federal Fisheries Minister Gail Shea last week.

Several politicians, including maverick Conservative MP John Cummins (Delta-Richmond East) and B.C. Environment Minister Barry Penner, have taken up the call as well.

"We have to get to the bottom of this issue because we're now in the final stages of a complete collapse of Fraser River sockeye," warns Cummins, a former commercial fisherman.

However, as these advocates point out, the process must have teeth because previous inquiries into declining salmon stocks have been ineffective.

"Sockeye have been managed by politicians, not by fish managers and biologists, since the early 1990s. Now the politics has to be removed," says McKamey.

But advocates are calling for a federal judicial inquiry because that's the only process with powers of subpoena where witnesses testify under oath -- and face penalties if they lie.

Numerous sources say some personnel within DFO won't voluntarily give their honest views in public for fear of jeopardizing their careers.

A judicial inquiry opens that door while reducing those legitimate career fears and that's why it's a preferred option.

"I certainly wouldn't have a problem with a judicial inquiry -- if it gets results," says Frank Kwak, chairman of the Upper Fraser Valley Sport Fishing Advisory Committee.

Will it happen? And if so, when? Cummins tells me he's worked non-stop on this file since last July, including his briefing senior officials in Ottawa.

"I expect there should be an announcement on an inquiry in the very near future," he says.

*blewis@theprovince.com*