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SALMON COLLAPSE In 2004: 'a real problem' Now: silence

MARK HUME VANCOUVER *mhume@globeandmail.com* Something terrible happened in the Fraser River in the summer of 2004, when the sockeye run collapsed, and it sounded alarms all the way to Ottawa, where the Opposition called for a judicial inquiry.

Why is there a deafening silence now? In 2004, about 4.4 million salmon were expected to return to the Fraser. Nearly two million fish were taken in the commercial, aboriginal and sports fisheries.

Despite the heavy fishing pressure, some 2.6 million sockeye entered the river, according to estimates based on acoustic counts. But when staff from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans checked the spawning beds several weeks later, most of the fish weren't there.

Somewhere in the Fraser River, 1.9 million fish had vanished.

High water temperatures and a native fishery were blamed, but not confirmed as causes.

The crisis drew a quick response from Conservative MPs, then in Opposition, who demanded action from the governing Liberals.

"It is such a mess that it is hard to say where the fish went.

It is a real problem." "In order to determine that and untangle this thing, we feel at this stage that we want action," Mr. Lunney said.

He called for a judicial inquiry.

"We want to get some action on this problem while we still have a fishery to protect," said Mr. Lunney, who remains in office.

John Duncan, then and still Conservative MP for Vancouver Island North, was of the same view.

"This crisis was inevitable since the DFO and successive Liberal ministers have consistently ignored warnings and advice on the fishery.

..[and] we do not believe that the DFO should be allowed to supervise the investigation of itself," he said in response to a letter from a B.C. couple who'd expressed their concerns.

In a similar letter, Tory leader Stephen Harper also called for a judicial inquiry and stated: "Please be assured that we firmly believe immediate action is required to resolve the B.C. salmon crisis." On Dec. 9, 2004, the Conservatives tabled a motion calling for, in Mr. Harper's words, "an independent judicial inquiry to determine the cause of the collapse of the sockeye salmon stocks in the Fraser River." The motion was defeated.

That was then. This year the problem got a lot worse, when some nine million sockeye vanished, plunging fishing families into despair and giving the Fraser its worst salmon return in history.

Phil Eidsvik, a spokesman for the B.C. Fisheries Survival Coalition, wanted a judicial inquiry in 2004. And he wants one now. So does Alexandra Morton, a research scientist who has done groundbreaking work on the impact of sea lice on wild salmon.

"We need answers. And we need people under oath to get those answers," she says.

Others, such as Larry Dill, a professor emeritus at Simon Fraser University, and Ron McLeod, former director of DFO in the Pacific Region, are calling for an investigation into the way DFO operates.

The agency, they believe, is dysfunctional to the point it has become a threat to the survival of salmon.

Now is the time for Mr. Harper to act.

He saw the crisis in 2004 when the Liberals were in charge of DFO. The crisis has deepened under Conservative management.

It should be clear to everyone - the agency running the fishery needs a thorough investigation.