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Sockeye disaster prompts call for public review by B.C. minister

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The disastrous 2009 Fraser sockeye season has prompted B.C. Environment Minister Barry Penner to ask the federal fisheries minister to call for a public review.

“The wide disparity between the forecasted and actual returns of Fraser River sockeye is a serious issue for British Columbians,” wrote Penner in a letter to Fisheries Minister Gail Shea. “The release of the annual run forecasts creates expectations by First Nations, as well as commercial and recreational anglers, and a shortfall has significant social and economic impacts on British Columbians.”

The B.C. minister requested a face-to-face meeting with the low-key federal minister to review the situation.

“One option would be to conduct a comprehensive public review of the 2009 sockeye returns,” Penner suggested in his letter to Shea dated Aug. 26. The review process would also look at DFO’s approach to the scientific data and its capacity for accurately forecasting salmon runs.

“I think it would be worth a full airing of their forecasting methods,” he later said in a followup interview.

Low returns of key Fraser sockeye stocks has been alarming various stakeholder groups for years.

“This year it seemed dramatic,” Penner said, in answer to why he felt a special review was required.

First Nation leaders from Sto:lo communities called for a similar type of inquiry into this year’s collapse of the Fraser sockeye earlier this summer. Yesterday biologist Alexandra Morton chimed in with a call for a full judicial inquiry in response to the situation.

Several scenarios to explain the cause of the low sockeye returns were floated, from overfishing, marine survival, and climate change, to ongoing habitat degradation and open-

pen fish farms.

Frank Kwak of the local Sport Fishing Advisory Board, was invited to the recent closed-door meeting in Vancouver hosted Minister Shea. He agrees with Minister Penner's call for a public review of the data.

"I agree that the data and forecasting methods have to be looked at," Kwak said. "There seems to be a big gap between what they forecast and what comes up the river."

Fisheries Minister Gail Shea did not return calls from The Progress, and she has not offered any response to the idea of a public review of the situation.

The minister did however release a brief statement through DFO media staff.

"I am committed to looking at all aspects of DFO‚Äôs 2009 post-season review, which involves counting the numbers of spawning salmon on spawning grounds, looking at environmental impacts, catch numbers, forecasted and actual returns," she wrote in an e-mailed statement.

"In addition, DFO will be considering all aspects of the salmon season, including our approach to salmon forecasting, as we work to enhance our understanding of the dynamics of salmon survival.

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