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Fraser River sockeye fry had little chance because of fish farms

I thought I was living in another universe the other day. I felt this way because our own Department of Fisheries and Oceans minister, Gail Shea, was in Norway at the major aquaculture get-together wooing them to come to Canada. Doesn't that seem strange?

It should because Norwegian companies own 92 per cent of the fish farms in B.C. But, according to our minister, we need vastly more of them in B.C. because it is "important to the Canadian economy." But here in B.C., it is becoming plain as day that the Fraser River sockeye collapse happened in the ocean as smolts swam past fish farms on their way to sea two years ago.

Other salmon species smolts made it by earlier when Slice had been used to kill fish farm lice and infections. That is part of the reason for the stellar sport fishing we have been having this summer. The other part is that ocean survival has been high, and this means that the sockeye run should have been huge. But it is a disaster. Respected commentators such as Brian Riddell of the Pacific Salmon Foundation 'suggested' it was a Strait of Georgia problem; hence the aprés Slice slaughter of Fraser sockeye.

It wasn't for lack of smolts. The outgoing numbers were huge. Why the Chilko Lake outpouring was a record 130 million. But they got whacked before they past out of Johnstone Strait. How do I know this? Because the DFO has known this for the past two years. They did test sets in the Strait of Georgia in 2007 and found only 157 smolts from the massive Chilko/Quesnel motherlode. And they came up with the 11 million estimate of this year's Fraser sockeye run, even though they knew two years ago it would not happen.

And once 11 million fish vanished, Paul Sprout, Pacific Region director, said in the Globe and Mail, "Sea lice from fish farms are not the explanation of this year's extremely poor marine survival of Fraser River sockeye..." My answer to this is: Oh, sure. That's why the sockeye fry had 28 sea lice a piece passing Campbell River area fish farms. A gauntlet of death.

And it doesn't explain the stupendous fishing we have witnessed this summer, from the positive La Nina phenomena. And it fails to reckon with other sockeye runs, for example,

Port Alberni's has been bountiful enough for sport and aboriginal fisheries for the past three months.

One prominent DFO scientist, Otto Langer, quit after 32 years, because of the fish farm issue. You should see the video of Shea glomming Norwegian fish moguls on saveourrivers.ca. She was also presented with a petition of 16,000 B.C. residents' names.

What do we want? We want fish farms in closed containments on land, with effluent treatment that also removes chemicals so outgoing water is as clean as the ingoing. And while we're at it, we want a clean-up of the Atlantic fry hatchery on the top of the Stamp River. It's fecal and chemical laden water flows in -- hard to believe -- about a kilometre above the Robertson Creek hatchery that puts out big numbers of Chinook, coho and the best fishing for summer and winter steelhead on Vancouver Island. Do remember the DFO has had the responsibility to eliminate pollution on waterways for the past 142 years.

Please, send a note to Shea at: Shea.G@parl.gc.ca. Tell her we want Canada to keep its fish farms out of B.C. Tell her we want DFO to stand up and enforce the laws that the Auditor General said it has been abrogating for more than a century. Tell her we need a B.C. Minister of Fisheries.

Oh, and her claim that it's important to the Canadian economy is simply false. Our B.C. government's own figures prove this: at less than two per cent of B.C.'s Gross Domestic Product and with around 2000 jobs, the industry can never ever be large enough to have a positive influence here, let alone for all of Canada. But the price? The country gives up five species of wild Pacific salmon. Priceless.