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Sockeye run looking like a disaster

Jimmy Adams, a fisherman with the Katzie First Nations puts away his nets in the backyard as the prospects of a sockeye salmon fishery are not looking good this year.

Simone Ponne/The News

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by Marelle Reid, contributor

The trickle that should have been a torrent of salmon returning to the Fraser River this summer has got some groups pointing fingers while others are quietly optimistic.

Less than 10 per cent of the sockeye run has arrived and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has closed sockeye to both commercial and First Nations fisheries.

Even sport catch and release of sockeye has been banned.

Based on the number of sockeye that hatched and made for the ocean four years ago, about 10 million fish were expected to come back to complete the four-year spawning cycle.

So far, fewer than a million have arrived.

“It’s a pretty serious concern,” said Phil Eidsvik, spokesperson for B.C. Fisheries Survival Coalition.

“We need a judicial inquiry into the management of the Fraser River fishery. The prime minister promised it and we know that some of the people who may have had dirty hands opposed the inquiry. If it had have happened we’d have the results already and we’d have some answers. And now we’re still swimming around in the dark.

While some First Nations groups have called for official talks about the problem, Katzie chief Mike Leon said he did not have enough information about the proposed inquiry to comment

on it.

The Katzie, Leon said, are disappointed by the closure of sockeye fishing, which has hurt them both socially and economically, but he said they respect the DFO's decision.

"Our guys are just sitting on the shore. We do have a chinook fishery, but we're sockeye fisherman, every one of us.

So there's a lot of us that aren't fishing," he said.

"But we're still all concerned about conservation as well. A lot of our guys would rather sit on the beach and make sure that the salmon get there for future generations."

Eidsvik said a number of factors may have influenced the desperately low number of returning sockeye, but suggested an inquiry would be the best way to get some answers for all fishing sectors.

However, the DFO said an open review of the situation is unlikely to be beneficial until numerous studies being done by several organizations have been concluded.

"This isn't the first time the numbers have been less than forecast in recent years so there's getting to be a body of information collected, but there's no definitive [answer]," said Barry Rosenberger, area director and Fraser panel chair for the DFO.

The DFO is looking at the past 50 years of averaging data on everything from marine and river temperatures to food sources and salinity in the ocean.

Rosenberger said it is possible the salmon are simply taking longer than usual to arrive, but called this "very unlikely."

The Pacific Salmon Foundation agreed it is conceivable the fish could be late, but suggested the DFO has taken the best tactic in closing down the sockeye fisheries until more is known about this season's run.

Brian Riddell, president and CEO of the PSF said, "The next week or 10 days is really the critical period."

Business is slightly lagging for Great River Fishing Adventures in Chilliwack, but owner Dean Werk said he fully expects to see sockeye flooding back into the Fraser by the end of the summer.

"I really, truly believe the sockeye will be here," he said. "It all stands to reason that the fish will be late again if you go by what happened four years ago."

Werk said he remembered when the DFO opened sockeye fishing to commercial fisheries in September 2005, much later than what would normally be expected, even for a late run.

Werk said he believes the warmer ocean temperatures may be to blame for the low number of fish this year and does not feel any one group is to blame for the problem.

Alex Rose, the West Vancouver author of a book on Canadian fishery collapses, says a moratorium on all salmon fishing is essential and will likely have to remain in place for years.

“We’re watching the catastrophic destruction of a resource,” said Rose, whose 2008 book Who Killed the Grand Banks? warned B.C.’s salmon may go the way of the Newfoundland cod.

He points the finger at greed on the part of all sectors and a failure of federal fisheries managers to halt overfishing.

“We have failed, we have destroyed the resource,” Rose said. “Nobody gets off the hook on this one.”

A new royal commission – this time with legal powers to subpoena witnesses – may be needed to get answers, he said.

Watershed Watch Salmon Society executive director Craig Orr wants to take a harder look at the impact of the expansion of fish farms and the effect of lice that kill the young salmon.

Orr said the province should err on the side of caution and shut down some fish farms to create a safe migration route for young salmon.

– with files from Black Press