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'Ottawa losing' in fish farm PR war: Richmond MP Cummins says environmentalists are 'telling the truth'

OTTAWA -- The federal government is losing the public relations battle with environmental groups on the issue of whether Ottawa is protecting wild salmon and properly regulating the fish farm industry, says an internal government document obtained Monday.

"A well-organized campaign by [environmental activists] to highlight flaws in fish farming has caused many British Columbians to either lose confidence in DFO [Department of Fisheries and Oceans] or question its commitment to conservation of wild salmon," according to the March, 2005 document.

"To a large extent, the department is seen as not fulfilling its duties as regulator of the aquaculture industry and preserver of B.C.'s wild Pacific salmon stocks," states the analysis, obtained through Access to Information by Conservative MP **John Cummins**.

The five-page report, called **Pacific Region Sea Lice Communications Strategy**, was prepared by B.C.-based communications official Diane Lake and approved in March.

The report was based on a number of focus group studies in Canada, including several throughout B.C., which involved bringing in randomly selected individuals who met to discuss public policy issues with a professional facilitator. The report focuses on the controversy over whether sea lice that often thrive in crowded fish farm pens end up infecting nearby juvenile wild salmon populations.

"Focus group research recently undertaken indicates that Canadians would feel more reassured about the industry if the department was seen as addressing concerns raised by environmental advocacy organizations," Lake wrote.

Participants in the studies are concerned about the industry's sustainability, "coupled with a desire for more honest and balanced information from DFO and from independent research."

Lake suggests the problem is linked partly to "a well-organized anti-aquaculture campaign by several environmental advocacy organizations to discredit DFO science and spread misinformation to the media and public about the alleged links to sea lice from fish farms."

She says there is "little to be gained by taking on these groups head-to-head in the media," suggesting instead that DFO "continue to be forthcoming about the scientific monitoring program and defend the credibility of the research and our scientists where required."

She proposes a "comprehensive outreach strategy" that would include as its objectives "correcting misinformation" and "being forthcoming about facts, evidence and information," and being "transparent and available."

Cummins (Delta-Richmond East) said Monday the document's conclusion about the public's lack of faith is dead-on, but he rejected Lake's assertion that misinformation is a factor.

"The environmental groups are winning the PR [public relations] war because they're telling the truth" about the dangers fish farms pose to wild stocks, he said.

He said the federal government is reluctant to admit any failures, given its high-profile political commitment to aquaculture and its \$15-million-a-year program to promote the industry and ease its regulatory burden.

"For them to admit any kind of a downside would reflect badly upon them, and I don't think they're prepared to do that."

An earlier draft of Lake's strategy identifies as fish farm critics the David Suzuki Foundation, the Raincoast Conservation Society, the T. Buck Suzuki Foundation, the Georgia Strait Alliance, the Sierra Legal Defence Fund, the Living Oceans Society, and the Watershed Watch Salmon Society. "The anti-aquaculture movement also has a champion in talk radio host and former provincial minister Rafe Mair, who routinely interviews opponents of fish farming."

Lake suggested Monday that DFO's problems relate partly to the strength of the environmentalist movement on the West Coast, but acknowledged the public is faced with "a lot of unanswered questions" about the industry. She rejected completely Cummins' allegation that DFO isn't telling the truth. "I think our scientists are extremely open in talking about some of the complexities of the issue."

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