

Surrey North Delta Leader

## Demise of Fraser sockeye a puzzle



The answer to the poor run of Fraser River sockeye this year is in the ocean, but fish farms' role is being disputed.

By [Jeff Nagel - Surrey North Delta Leader](#)

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Early signs suggest the mystery killer of millions of Fraser River sockeye was something in the Pacific ocean – not local overfishing or inadequate spawning by the previous generation of salmon.

Large numbers of sockeye reached the spawning grounds in 2005 and acoustic surveys showed enough juvenile fish hatched and made it out of Chilko Lake and Quesnel Lake to produce the bulk of this year's anticipated return of 10.5 million sockeye.

Biologists say it means something must have happened between the time the young fish left the river and entered the ocean in the late spring and summer of 2007 and their return as adults this summer.

As a result, just over a million sockeye are so far estimated to be coming back, just a tenth of the forecast.

That could rise somewhat – the size of some of the late runs haven't been estimated – but 2009 is still likely to go down as the worst year in recorded history for Fraser sockeye.

Commercial fishing is closed, First Nations food fishing has been halted and sports anglers have been ordered not to fish for sockeye, even by catch and release.

Department of Fisheries and Oceans area director and Fraser panel chair Barry Rosenberger says the cause of the collapse is a puzzle, and everything from ocean temperatures to unusual predator fish could be at play.

"Are there new species that are not normally present? What does it do to food sources? There's a number of things to take a look at," he said.

Rosenberger said one possible culprit advanced by opponents of salmon farms – sea lice that come from the farms and can infect passing wild salmon – doesn't seem to mesh with incoming evidence.

"Skeena River sockeye returned at less than half their forecast and there's no fish farm or sea lice issues in their area," he said.

Meanwhile, pink salmon, considered more susceptible to lice, are returning in healthy numbers, he said.

But biologist Alexandra Morton says there's a good explanation for that discrepancy: juvenile pinks headed out to sea a year later than the sockeye and 2008 was a much improved year for sea lice than 2007.

She says she sampled young sockeye in 2007 that were riddled with sea lice.

"The sockeye had up to 28 lice each," she said.

Morton said the Somass River sockeye run on the southwest tip of Vancouver Island, which doesn't migrate through the main concentration of salmon farms between the island and mainland, appears strong.

She accuses DFO of avoiding a hard look at fish farms, which she described as at least one factor affecting salmon survival that B.C. can control.

"They do not want these fish," she said. "They ruined the east coast cod stocks and they're doing the same thing here."

The B.C. First Nations Fisheries Council has proposed an international salmon summit to focus B.C., Canadian and U.S. policy makers on finding ways to restore Fraser salmon runs and reform the fishery.

"Something really profound has happened here," said Sto:lo fisheries adviser Ernie Crey. "We need to hear from everyone."

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