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Report recommends B.C. farms convert to closed-containment systems



Ben DiPietro
 Published - May 18, 2007

The aquaculture committee of the British Columbia provincial government approved a report Wednesday that recommends B.C. fish farmers convert their farming operations to closed-containment systems within five years.

Fish farmers say the idea is unworkable, as the technology doesn't exist to conduct high-scale commercial fish farming using closed-containment systems, pointing out no growers anywhere in the world employ such a system.

"The committee was well informed of how this industry has been built upon world-class, 'made-in-Canada' scientific research," said Ruth Salmon, executive director of the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance. "Yet, rather than recognizing the excellent work of Canadian scientists, it is endorsing a production system that science has shown to be environmentally unjustifiable."

The B.C. legislature's sustainable aquaculture committee voted 5-4 to recommend the province become the world leader in developing alternative methods to growing salmon in the ocean. The five votes to approve the plan came from New Democrat party members that used the issue of reforming salmon farming to win votes from environmentalists in the last election. The four votes against the plan came Liberal party members.

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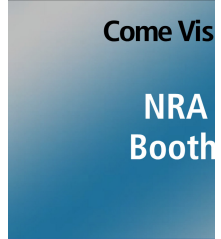
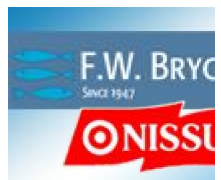
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recommendation to transition the industry to new technology within five years. On the surface it may sound reasonable -- and the NDP are counting on you, the media, to accept their version of the truth."

Work is under way to see B.C. become an established world leader in sustainable salmon farming, said Jay Ritchlin, David Suzuki Foundation marine conservation specialist. "The province doesn't need to re-invent the wheel," he said. "There are entrepreneurs out there eager and ready to build closed systems this year and we encourage the government to support and expand on these efforts."

As part of an ongoing dialogue CAAR says it is working with Marine Harvest Canada, the biggest salmon farming company in B.C., to initiate a joint study to assess the technical and economic feasibility of ocean-based closed-containment systems.

The committee also voted to prohibit aquaculture north of Cape Caution, which goes against the wishes of some First Nations groups interested in pursuing salmon farming within their traditional territories.

The salmon farmers association says pilot projects undertaken by industry and government in B.C. and other parts of the world have raised significant concerns about fish health and the energy use required to mimic ocean conditions in the closed concrete containers being proposed for use.

"The idea that we could turn away from scientifically developed and environmentally sustainable practices to gamble with the health of our livestock by attempting to rear them in systems with no data to support their claimed benefits is simply not acceptable," said Alistair Houghton, deputy managing director, Mainstream Canada.

B.C. salmon farmers already have to meet the strictest regulation for environmental protection of any producing country in the world. Farmers say this is acceptable, but the committee's recommendation to transition the industry to closed containment systems is not.

Raising fish in closed-containment systems reduces fish health and increases energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, the association says.

"While we haven't had an opportunity to read the report in detail, based on what we understand is being recommended we are disappointed," said Clare Backman of Marine Harvest Canada. "We had hoped for more innovative, original recommendations providing for the continuity of a strong viable industry while addressing the issues of sustainability."

Environmental groups rushed to defend the report. "The committee recommendation to transition to closed containment is completely in line with public opinion and concerns," said Catherine Stewart of Living Oceans Society, part of the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform (CAAR), an umbrella group for fish farming watchdogs and opponents.

"The people of B.C. want to see the government invest in closed containment and the special committee has recommended a path to get there. Now it is time for the government to act."

The committee's report presents a balanced solution to supporting salmon farming in BC and the benefits it brings to communities, while addressing the need to stop the expansion of open net-cages and move to farming technologies that protect wild salmon and our oceans, CAAR said.

B.C.'s salmon farming industry is estimated at CAD \$485 million (\$440



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million/€325 million) a year, and responsible for creating more than 5,000 jobs.

“The NDP are slamming the door in the face of our people,” said Chief White of Gitxaala First Nation. “We believe aquaculture creates a sustainable economy that will allow our people to build meaningful jobs and careers in our traditional homes. The report presented today is totally unacceptable.”

A recent report by PriceWaterhouseCooper shows the direct employment in salmon farming has more than doubled since the early 1990s and there are strong market prospects for the future. Production increased to 82,000 metric tons in 2006, up 16 percent over 2005. But market demand has grown more quickly and is greater than B.C.’s production.

“Certainty is critical to provide security for our members existing investments and to encourage investment into many remote rural communities,” said Walling.

The salmon farmers association gave the committee grades of 'F' for the way it handled issues of salmon farming involving science, economics, social, and environmental studies.

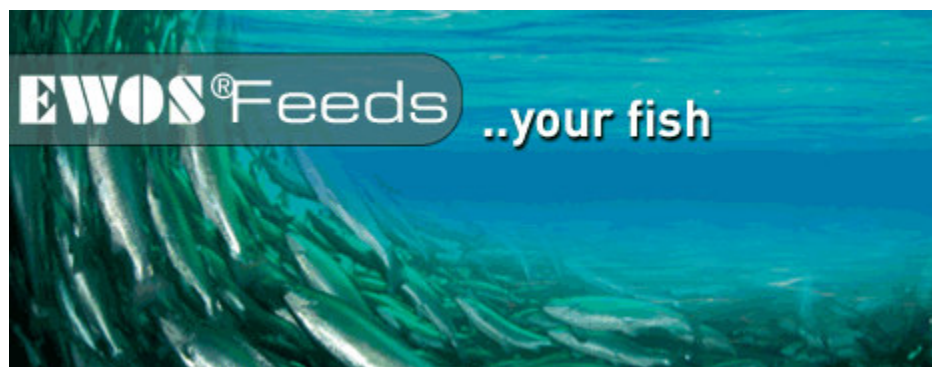
With regard to science, the BCSFA said the committee "chose to ignore all relevant scientific research and available technology. Has difficulty understanding scientific terminology and using it correctly. Limited understanding of fish health."

For economics, it said: "Failure to demonstrate an understanding of basic economic principles: market systems, supply and demand, cost accounting, return on investment, profit and loss, capital investment. Failure to demonstrate an understanding of tariffs, NAFTA, financial incentives and the global marketplace."

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