



Application made to reopen Cohen Commission into the decline of Fraser River salmon

Discovery of Salmon Heart Virus Threat to Fraser Sockeye

April 24, 2012 (Vancouver, BC) Today, the Aquaculture Coalition, which includes Alexandra Morton represented by Gregory McDade, submitted an application to the Cohen Commission into the decline of the Fraser Sockeye seeking to reopen hearings and examine new and significant disease findings pursuant to Rule 65.

Farm salmon purchased during February 2012 in BC supermarkets tested positive for the newly discovered piscine reovirus (PRV). This virus has been identified as the cause of Heart and Skeletal Muscle Inflammation (HSMI). Piscine reovirus weakens the heart of salmon. The Aquaculture Coalition believes the impact of this heart disease has to be considered as a contributing factor to the decline of the Fraser sockeye.

The Cohen Commission heard testimony that up to 90% of the sockeye entering the Fraser River die as they attempt to reach their spawning grounds, swimming through strong rapids such as the famous Hells Gate.

First discovered in a Norwegian salmon farm in 1999, HSMI spread rapidly through Norway to infect over 400 farms today. The disease is described as spreading like “wildfire” (<http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/tag/hsmi/>).

The Atlantic farm salmon (44/45 samples) purchased (February 2012) by Morton from Vancouver and Victoria supermarkets tested positive for PRV. Loblaw confirmed these fish had been reared in BC waters. This suggests PRV is widespread in BC farm salmon. Most salmon farms in BC are on the Fraser sockeye migration routes.

In a televised interview (April 20, 2012) Dr. Gary Marty, the Provincial farm salmon veterinarian and Cohen Commission witness confirmed he found the virus in 75% of BC farm salmon he tested. Dr. Marty suggests the piscine reovirus is not a concern. However, a joint scientific publication by the Center for Infection and Immunity, Columbia University, New York and Norwegian government scientists state: “...it is urgent that measures be taken to control PRV not only because it threatens domestic salmon production but also due to the potential for transmission to wild salmon populations.” <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2901333/?tool=pubmed> The evidence that PRV is common in farm salmon was missing from the disease reports provided to the Cohen Commission by Dr. Marty.

Although the provincial vet reports the virus in “sick fish,” spokesperson for the BC Salmon Farmer’s Association, Mary Ellen Walling claims they are not seeing any indication of the virus. <http://www.fis.com/fis/worldnews/worldnews.asp?l=e&country=0&special=&monthyear=&day=&id=51475&ndb=1&df=0> These two statements are contradictory.

DFO spokesperson Frank Stanek assures us: “Government of Canada scientists have not confirmed the presence of this virus in Canadian fish, despite extensive monitoring and testing.” <http://www.timescolonist.com/news/Government+officials+salmon+farmers+contradict+claims+disease+farmed+salmon/6462981/story.html#ixzz1sPPnrv9>

However, DFO scientist Dr. Kristy Miller testified at the Cohen Commission on early findings that the PRV virus was detected in Chinook farms in Clayoquot Sound, as well as, in Fraser sockeye.

HSMI is not a reportable disease so the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is not directly involved. The Atlantic Veterinary Lab sequenced the virus found in the supermarket samples (collected by Morton in February 2012) and reports it is 99% identical to piscine reovirus found in Norwegian farmed salmon.

“The obvious potential that piscine reovirus is killing Fraser sockeye by weakening their hearts, rendering them less capable of fighting their way through white water rapids like Hells Gate was never raised at the inquiry. Despite the Province of BC apparently knowing it was common in salmon farms,” said Alexandra Morton.

Morton observed, “The presence of this virus is significant evidence in puzzle of the Fraser salmon collapse because Cohen heard evidence that over 90% of Fraser sockeye die as they are swimming upstream, a weakened heart could be causing this. Justice Cohen can not complete his work if pieces of the puzzle are kept from him.”

Morton went on to say, “I sympathize with Justice Cohen, he has seen DFO spokespeople contradicting their own scientists – which is how we lost the North Atlantic cod. Justice Cohen is blindfolded by the lack of full disclosure. His report will not be complete without getting to the bottom of this, just like he did for the ISA virus.”

The Aquaculture Coalition submits that the Commission should receive new evidence regarding the epidemiology and impacts of PRV and HSMI in salmon populations on a global scale and should hear evidence regarding its presence in British Columbia.

In particular, the knowledge of Dr. Miller and Dr. Marty regarding the presence of PRV and HSMI in fish farms in British Columbia is relevant to the Commissioner’s inquiry and an opportunity to hear their evidence is warranted.

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For more information or to schedule interviews contact: Alexandra Morton 250-974-7086, Gregory McDade 604-988-5201

Copies of the letter requesting the Cohen Commission be reopened, submitted by Gregory McDade on behalf of The Aquaculture Coalition to Brian Wallace, Q.C., Cohen Commission Senior Counsel, can be found at <http://bit.ly/17mNxH>