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Fish farm licences challenged in Federal Court

Transfer provisions are unlawful and must be struck down, Ecojustice lawyers to argue

VANCOUVER — Aquaculture licences issued by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans that allow fish farms to transfer farmed Atlantic salmon carrying disease agents into waters shared with wild salmon are unlawful and must be struck down, Ecojustice lawyers will argue in Federal Court today.

“The Department of Fisheries and Oceans is standing by while companies decide to put fish carrying viruses into the ocean,” said Margot Venton, Ecojustice staff lawyer. “Not only is this a reckless approach to marine protection, but we believe it is unlawful.”

Ecojustice lawyers, acting on behalf of biologist Alexandra Morton, filed the lawsuit last May after learning that fish infected with the piscine reovirus (PRV) had been transferred into an open-pen fish farm operated by Marine Harvest in Shelter Bay, B.C., located along the Fraser River sockeye migration route.

Marine Harvest was operating under the terms of a federal aquaculture licence that gave it the power to decide whether to transfer diseased fish into the marine environment — a responsibility that should rest solely with DFO.

“DFO has a mandate to protect wild fish. How can it do that when it has given away its decision-making powers to the same fish farm companies it is supposed regulate?” Morton said. “DFO is basically letting the fox guard the chicken coop. The industry has claimed that PRV poses no risk to wild salmon, but the weight of scientific evidence suggests otherwise.”

Scientists have warned that PRV must be contained to prevent widespread infection of wild fish populations. The virus is associated with and thought to cause Heart and Skeletal Muscle Inflammation (HSMI), a severe disease that affects the muscles and heart of salmon.

HSMI can weaken salmon to the point they are unable to swim up a river and reproduce. The disease was first observed on Norwegian salmon farms in 1999 and spread quickly; it is now thought to have spread to virtually all fish farms in Norway, affecting close to 100 per cent of farmed fish sampled.

While the effects of PRV on B.C. wild salmon are still unknown, permitting fish farms to place infected Atlantic salmon on the Fraser sockeye migration route flies in the face of the recommendations of the \$26-million Cohen Commission. The inquiry’s final report concluded that “salmon farms along the sockeye migration route have the potential to introduce exotic diseases and to exacerbate endemic diseases that could have a negative impact on Fraser River sockeye.”

“It comes down to which fish are your priority – farmed fish or wild fish?” Morton said. “It’s inherently risky to introduce a virus with potentially harmful consequences into the ocean. That’s not a gamble Canadians want to take.”



Background information:

B-roll and photos are available for media use at www.salmonconfidential.ca/lawsuit

A summary of key facts on PRV and HSMI can be found at:

<http://www.ecojustice.ca/files/prv-hsmi-summary-of-facts-may-2013/>

A e-copy of our Notice of Application can be found here:

http://www.ecojustice.ca/files/salmon-aquaculture-notice-of-application_filed/

For more information, please contact:

Devon Page, executive director | Ecojustice
604.685.5618 x233

Alexandra Morton
250.974.7086