

Is Norwegian current aquaculture crisis, sneak preview for BC fish farming industry?

BC and Norway mirror images of a salmon farming disaster



Norwegian sportfisherman, André Moe Stangstuen, holds up escaped steelhead in Norway, tail worn off, large open sore - photo by Erlend Vivelid Nilssen

One month ago, on January 10, 2015, the Norwegian coast was hit by a hurricane. After the storm, the first sport fishermen in the fjords near the west coast city of Bergen got a nasty surprise. Schools of farmed steelhead (sea run rainbow trout) escaped from damaged fish farms were visible from the surface. They were so numerous, NRK *national news*, reported the fjords of Western Norway were boiling with farmed rainbow trout on the run.

The sports fishermen immediately realized that these non-native steelhead were a potent threat to the few wild Atlantic salmon left in Norway. They could see many were ready to spawn and were determined to eliminate them before they could do incalculable damage by digging up river gravel where fragile wild Atlantic salmon eggs were incubating.

The irony is inescapable. The situation in BC and Norway are mirror images - British Columbians focused on protecting wild Pacific salmon from infected farmed Atlantic salmon, with Norwegians engaged in protecting wild Atlantic salmon from infected steelhead – a North American fish.

BC's wild steelhead are much loved in British Columbia. People spend thousands of dollars to come here for the chance to fish steelhead. But in Norway, they are now hated escaped farmed fish.

Initial estimates of tens of thousands of escapees, escalated to over 120,000. The fishermen went very public. There were warnings not to eat the farm fish, that they contained de-lousing drugs. This rapidly became political, since Norway had just announced a zero-escape farm salmon policy.

It was then that an extraordinary thing happened. The Askøy Hunter & Fisherman's Association, alarmed by the horribly sick appearance of the steelhead, sent samples to Dr. Are Nylund, a leading salmon disease scientist based at the University of Bergen. "All of the fish that I have analyzed were very sick," reported Nylund to the Norwegian

newspaper *BA Bergensavisen*. It was Nylund and his team who tracked the ISA virus from Norway into Chile where it caused \$2 billion in damages killing millions of farmed salmon.

The Norwegian government, slow to respond to the massive escape, was very quick to discourage public disease testing, asking people to only use the “official” labs. A government spokesperson noted that just because the dreaded salmon pancreas disease, spreading through Norwegian salmon farms was detected in the escaped steelhead did not mean the fish were sick. However, she failed to capture the concern.

The issue was not whether the farm fish were sick, but could they infect the fragile wild salmon populations with viruses they carry. There are only about 500,000 wild Atlantic salmon left in Norway. This is less than half the fish often found in a single farm and .01% of the entire Norwegian farmed salmon population.

The salmon aquaculture industry was invented in the mid 1970's by Norwegians, ten years before Norwegian companies came to BC to set up farms in the early 1980's. In Norway, salmon farms are now considered a major cause of the loss of wild salmon.

On January 29, 2015, Ola Borten Moe, leader of the Centre Party, suggested it is time for Norway to waive the high cost of salmon farm licences (over \$1 million CDN) for any salmon farm established on land. He suggested this would protect Norway's environment, stimulate innovation, solve the industry's escalating disease and lice problems *and* increase job opportunities across the country. This was quickly echoed by Norwegian Green Party representative Kristin Mørch, "*Aquaculture is causing massive destruction and operates large-scale animal cruelty. Change can no longer be refused, restructure is going to push forward whether you want to or not... yes, to farming, but not at the expense of the environment and animal welfare.*"

Norway is the cradle of the salmon farming industry, it was born there, the head offices are there. When Norwegian politicians declare it is time to move the industry into closed tanks, perhaps it really *is* time. BC First Nations, scientists, environmentalists, fishermen hold the same point of view. No one wants farmed salmon to push wild salmon off our plates.

In an open letter Norwegian sportfishermen have asked their Minister of Fisheries to resign.

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