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Canadian salmon farmers: 'Leave us out of your shutdown'

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By Lauren Kramer

As finfish aquaculture ban nears reality in Washington, northern neighbors reaffirm confidence in their operations



The potential of a salmon-farming ban in Washington state is being monitored closely next door, in British Columbia, where many more salmon farms operate. But they're not worried about a spillover effect.

The days of salmon farming in Washington may be numbered. A bill to phase the industry out of state waters within the next seven years sits on Gov. Jay Inslee's desk, the result of a political firestorm that followed a catastrophic net-pen collapse on Cypress Island last August, in which about a quarter-million fish escaped. He's expected to sign it.

Cooke Aquaculture, which became the farm owner and lease holder after its 2016 acquisition of Icicle Seafoods, feels the company is being unfairly punished, and that appeals from scientific experts are being ignored. The Canadian-owned company is urging Gov. Inslee to veto House Bill 2957.

The situation is being monitored closely next door, in British Columbia, where some 115 salmon farms operate, 10 times as many as Washington. But they're not worried about a spillover effect.

"I think in B.C. we do things really well," said Rocky Boschman, managing director at Grieg Seafood in Campbell River, B.C. "I don't remember a time in the last 30 years when a B.C. farm catastrophically broke up. Our companies have voluntarily moved towards purchasing better equipment and insisting on higher standards and we've looked to Norway for guidance."

Jeremy Dunn, executive director of the BC Salmon Farmers' Association, said its members' record on escapes – or lack thereof – is "exemplary."

"We haven't had a large-scale escape in the last decade," he said. "Our members invest heavily in operations to ensure they're using the newest and latest technology in farming infrastructure and nets, to ensure the highest degree of containment. So we're quite confident in our ability to contain our animals and farm in a sustainable way. And our governments have been steadfast that they make science-based decisions. We expect that will continue."

One member of the provincial government has expressed concern about ocean-based open-net fish farms. Doug Donaldson, minister of forest, land and natural resource operations and rural development in British Columbia, told CBC News that he favors closed containment and a phase-out of ocean-based salmon farming.

"We're very concerned as a government about protecting wild salmon and the migratory routes that they use and we're very interested in moving to closed containment where feasible," he said.

The option to ban Atlantic salmon farming is out of his jurisdiction, as it is regulated by the federal government. But Donaldson said after the collapse of Cooke's Atlantic salmon farm he would like to "try a new approach. What we really want to do is look at the long term of aquaculture with the First Nations involved, with community and with industry. We know there's bright spots in the future as far as closed containment when it comes to Atlantic salmon farming."

The extensive media coverage of the Cypress Island escape did not reflect well on salmon farmers and Dunn said it was used as part of an ongoing campaign against the industry by a small but "very vocal activist crowd" in British Columbia that is fundamentally opposed to salmon farming.

"But that escape wasn't an example of salmon farming – it was an example of bad practices, which we've already eliminated," he said. "Since this escape happened we've had more people asking questions like, 'Can this happen here?' We're using those questions as an opportunity to provide education on the steps our members are taking to ensure this can't and won't happen in B.C., because our farms are engineered to withstand the highest possible currents and seas."

Ian Roberts, director of public affairs for Marine Harvest Canada, said the Cypress Island escape has had no effect on the indigenous partners and communities where the company operates.

"They're well aware that Washington state is in a different country with different regulations and conditions," he said. "We're quite confident that our investment in infrastructure in the last decade has ensured our fish are staying in the pens and we're third-party audited. We're also the only region in the world with a 'good alternative' rating for farmed Atlantic salmon from the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which suggests to the communities where we operate that we do good business."

Dunn pointed out the absence of science-based evidence that escaped Atlantic salmon could colonize in Pacific waters.

"Fisheries & Oceans Canada runs the Atlantic Salmon Watch program, initiated 20 years ago when escapes were relatively common here," he noted. "They've never found evidence of colonized Atlantic salmon in B.C. rivers, despite millions of Atlantic salmon smolts being intentionally released in attempts to colonize Atlantic salmon in B.C., California, Washington and Oregon dating all the way back to the 1800s up until the 1980s and 90s."



"The practices by industry here in B.C. are second to none, and as a commercial fisherman who has been on the water all my life I have no concerns about escapes."

James Walkus, a member of the Gwa'sala-Nakwaxda'xw Nation and owner of James Walkus Fishing Company, whose boats supply Marine Harvest, said he is concerned about comments made by Dem. Sen. Kevin Ranker. Ranker stated that "an American ban on Atlantic salmon farming will be less effective in the shared ecosystem of the Salish Sea if fish farms continue to operate in Canadian waters."

"I think Washington state should leave us Canadians out of their shutdown," Walkus said. "Marine Harvest is always trying to upgrade and make sure that if anything happens they are prepared. They're doing a very good job, so I'm not worried about potential escapes and nor are most of our natives employed with the aquaculture program. But in my community Alexandra Morton is giving out false information and some native people are just following her."

Richard Harry, head of the Aboriginal Aquaculture Association and a Campbell River commercial fisherman with the Homalco First Nation, said Atlantic salmon farming in B.C. has compensated for the decline of the wild salmon fishery and created jobs and stability in First Nations communities.

"The practices by industry here in B.C. are second to none, and as a commercial fisherman who has been on the water all my life I have no concerns about escapes. I think what's happening right now in Washington State is an overreaction by government," he said.

Joel Richardson, VP-public relations for Cooke Aquaculture Pacific, agrees.

"There were larger escapes of Atlantic salmon multiple times under the watch of the previous domestic owners of our operation, Icicle, and the state took no remedial, punitive or legislative action to ban net pens then," he noted. Richardson referenced an escape of 107,000 fish in 1996, an escape of 369,000 in 1997 and an escape of 115,000 in 1999. "We think that because we are Canadian foreign owners the state is targeting and punishing us unjustly."

Seven months prior to Cypress Island net pen collapse, Cooke had applied to state and federal regulation bodies for a permit to replace the net pens, which Richardson said “had not received much investment from the previous domestic American owners over the 30-plus years they were in operation. Unfortunately, we didn’t receive approval back from those regulatory bodies by the time the pen collapsed.”

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