

Letter to the Editor:

DFO Undermining Fisheries Minister's Mandate

Watching the Department of Fisheries and Oceans manage Fisheries ministers these days is a bit like binge-watching old episodes of the BBC sitcom *Yes, Minister!*, except that the Canadian version is rapidly becoming a tragedy for wild salmon.

The Minister's marching orders are 'to transition open netpen salmon farms from BC waters by 2025'. Her Department, seeing no need to do that, is currently consulting on issuing new salmon farm licences for terms of 2-6 years, when they expire in June of this year.

This is only the latest in a series of moves designed to subvert the transition planning process with recent Fisheries ministers.

When former Fisheries Minister Jonathan Wilkinson decided, in 2019, to convene a multi-stakeholder table to address the threats posed by salmon farms to wild BC salmon, staff ensured that no issue of any substance was actually addressed by "multi-stakeholders". The most critical issue, the transfer of disease-causing viruses from farmed to wild salmon, was taken behind closed doors with a hand-picked assortment of industry and government veterinariansⁱ who proceeded to define the disease in question out of existence. If it can never be diagnosed on the farms, the thorny question of its transmission to wild salmon disappears!

When former Fisheries Minister Bernadette Jordan was faced with a decision in 2020 whether or not to re-issue the Discovery Islands salmon farm licences, staff withheld scientific research from DFO's own molecular genetics lab, showing clear correlation between elevated levels of bacteria near Discovery Islands salmon farms and poor returns of wild salmon. Instead of passing on the urgent, cautionary advice coming from Dr. Kristi Miller, they sent up a briefing note saying, "Unpublished results from Strategic Salmon Health Initiative propose link between Discovery Island farms and bacterial infection... of Fraser sockeye and other salmon species"ⁱⁱ. Neither this evidence, nor the Department's own lab findings to the effect that sockeye salmon suffer 'profound physiological effects'ⁱⁱⁱ from infection with sea lice, made it into the decision memo offered to the Minister for the licensing decision. Either piece of information would have supported a discretionary decision by the Minister to refuse the licences on conservation grounds.

In 2022, when former Fisheries Minister Joyce Murray rolled up her sleeves and got down to work on the transition planning, staff read, 'transition farms from BC waters' as a typo for 'progressively

reduce or eliminate interactions with wild salmon’ and crafted an entire consultative process around this concept without ever identifying the “interactions” that were to be reduced, or the circumstances in which elimination might be preferred over reduction.

The decisions of both former Ministers Jordan and Murray faced judicial review proceedings that would not have been possible had the Department made full and fair disclosure of salmon farm impacts on wild salmon in the decision memos they prepared. Both also face personal lawsuits for damages for malfeasance in office, premised on the idea that they rejected the advice of their Department with some kind of malintent.

It goes without saying that our elected officials deserve better service from the bureaucracy. At the same time, one wonders when, or if, elected officials are going to take on the task of righting the wrongs in this Department. Since 2000, no fewer than 14 independent reviews of the Department’s ability to provide objective science advice on salmon farming have concluded that there are serious, systemic failures requiring remediation. The most recent of those, a study by the House Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans released one year ago, made 48 recommendations for improvements to science and the process of developing science advice, including a number of audits and independent reviews. The response prepared by the Department made it clear they have no intention of commissioning the recommended audits and reviews. To date, none of the recommendations has been resolved and the Department has no plan to address at least 25 of them.

The ball is now in the court of Fisheries Minister Diane Lebovitch, who faces a daunting task. Should she try to fulfill her mandate and actually close farms, her Department’s science advice will apparently remain unchanged. Despite over 50 papers documenting harm from salmon farms that contradict DFO’s low-risk assessments for aquaculture, they have not updated the risk assessments. This virtually guarantees that any attempt to close more farms will result in further litigation. Will she leave that mess for the next Fisheries minister, or try to take on the long-overdue reform of the Department by insisting on up-to-date risk assessments conducted with independent scrutiny, as recommended by all those reports and reviews? We should know shortly: her draft Transition Plan is due this year.

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ⁱ <https://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/aquaculture/publications/summary-sommaire-eng.html#marine>

ⁱⁱ ATIP **A-2020-01561-DSP**

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://afspubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/aah.10053>