

## Published in Vancouver Sun, October 2011

While fishermen are alarmed to learn about the finding of a European virus in two wild British Columbia sockeye salmon, the news comes as no great surprise. Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA) has erupted in every country that farms salmon. Why would anyone think Canada is immune? Despite the presence of this disease in East Coast farms, British Columbia still allows the importation of non-indigenous Atlantic salmon eggs from other countries. It was just a matter of time.

When Alaska banned fish farms, the top reason was to avoid disease spreading to our wild stocks. What was at stake was no mystery: Norway had already killed entire populations of wild fish due to parasites and disease introduced by imported salmon. Our state wisely chose to avoid such risk; yet folks to the south of us put us squarely in the path of what Alaskans feared the most.

For me, there is no joy in our fears being realized - no sense of vindication. The potential implications for wild salmon are too chilling. Fortunately, this virus poses no threat to humans.

As the representative of Alaska fishermen who rely exclusively on the health of wild fish, I am appalled by the near-silence of the Canadian agencies responsible to protect them. I've reserved comment in hopes that they would send some signal to the public, and West Coast fishermen in particular, that Canada is proactively engaged with a 'fish first' attitude.

On Friday Oct. 21 - more than a week after ISA was detected in B.C. salmon - Canadian officials issued a press release devoid of any sense of urgency. Canada announced they will run more tests, wait several weeks for results, and only then, if additional testing reveals ISA, stakeholders will be convened to, "*identify and take appropriate next steps.*"

Really?!

It's sound practice to verify a diagnostic result, particularly one with significant ramifications. What seems beyond the pale is the decision to wait weeks before convening the experts to develop a plan of action. In fact, it's incredible there wasn't a contingency plan in place long before the first farmed Atlantic salmon was placed in an ocean net pen.

At minimum, you'd think the Canadian government would try to assure us, by pointing to the experts they immediately pulled together to brainstorm how to evaluate the extent of the problem and methods to contain and control it. Instead, in his opening response to questions from the B.C. Legislature, Minister of Agriculture and Lands Don McRae quipped, "*Well, we've got another example of spinning media headlines and fearmongering from the opposition.*" Not exactly re-assuring.

Dr. Frederick Kibenge, the scientist who diagnosed ISA in British Columbia, is the same doctor who heads the World Animal Health Organization (OIE) lab specializing in ISA. He has both studied and diagnosed ISA outbreaks, most notably in Chile, where it was found in both Pacific and Atlantic salmon. In 2007, ISA wiped out 70 percent of Chile's farmed salmon production. I find it strange that fisheries officials seem to downplay the findings of this respected OIE scientist, as opposed to fast-tracking a more comprehensive investigation.

We've also read statements that minimize the threat to Pacific salmon. Yet Dr. Kibenge isolated ISA in Pacific coho salmon at a Chilean farm, where large numbers of coho died from the disease. Dr. James Winton, fish health section chief of the U.S. Geological Survey's Western Fisheries Research Center,

has conducted much of the research on the topic. He co-authored a paper in 2003 that showed Pacific salmon less susceptible to ISA than Atlantics, but included was a cautionary note, that the threat to Pacific salmon should not be ignored, since viruses often adapt. Winton has described last week's ISA finding as a "*disease emergency*" with "*global implications*".

Canada needs to explain to the public precisely what it is doing to monitor and enforce biological safeguards on the fish farm industry. Canada and the U.S. have a responsibility to protect the wild public resources they hold in trust for us all.

Alaska Trollers Associations appreciates the fast response of Congress, led by Senators Maria Cantwell, Lisa Murkowski, and Mark Begich, directing federal agencies to assess ISA risk to Pacific salmon within six months. Hopefully, NOAA will secure important information to guide future policy. However, if steps are not immediately taken to gather data on the situation at hand, to inform the deliberative processes in both the US and Canada, then time will be lost as we search for ways to protect wild fish. The clock is ticking.

I have no desire to strike fear into the hearts of the public or the fishermen I represent. However, we need transparency and assurance that appropriate steps are underway. If the Canadian government has information to quell our concerns, we have not yet heard it. If they have an effective plan of action, we have not yet seen it. How do fisheries professionals in Canada and along the West Coast intend to safeguard wild fish and fishing communities from the introduction of foreign disease strains now, and into the future? We're listening.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dale Kelley is long-time Executive Director of the Alaska Trollers Association, who has the good fortune to sometimes leave her desk behind and go commercial trolling for salmon.