

Backgrounder - Pacific Salmon Forum Final Report

- The Pacific Salmon Forum (PSF) was initiated with the announcement by Premier Campbell and Minister of Agriculture Food and Fisheries, John van Dongen, in December 2004. The BC government allocated \$5 million to fund it for 3 years, and an office officially opened on April 1, 2005 in Nanaimo.
- The PSF consisted of 7 appointed members, with a mandate to develop policy recommendations to: protect and enhance wild salmon stocks and their economic, social and environmental benefits to BC; increase public confidence in management of fisheries, aquaculture and the marine environment; enhance economic, social and environmental sustainability of aquaculture for coastal communities.
- The PSF initiated the Broughton Archipelago Research Program in January 2007. It was comprised of a suite of research projects conducted by academic, and government scientists looking at farmed and wild fish interactions with sea lice.
- The conservation community was one of many stakeholder groups that worked hard to help push the PSF to meet its mandate. Although the Forum's recently released recommendations provide an opportunity for positive change, significant concerns remain.

We support several acknowledgements and recommendations:

- The PSF acknowledges that there are negative impacts from salmon farming, and considers improvements to industry as greatly needed. This simple recognition from governments and industry could have saved years of circular arguments, millions of tax-payer dollars, and countless numbers of lost wild salmon.
- The PSF recommends a holistic, ecosystem-based, approach to managing our coastal watersheds and marine areas. To be successful, it will require full cooperation between, and commitment from, the provincial and the federal governments. The Forum correctly notes that scientists around the world agree that regulating all the impacts humans have on the environment in isolation is bound to lead to the demise of our natural resources.
- The Forum emphasized the need for transparency by governments and industry, and called for greater regulation of the industry rather than the current reliance on its self-monitoring. B.C.'s poor track record on transparency and access to information has recently been publicly criticized, and has certainly frustrated progress on reforming the salmon farming industry.

Several recommendation concerns remain:

- Specifics around the measurement and regulation of sea lice, the most studied of the negative impacts from salmon farms on wild salmon, are too vague to be effective. The recommended maximum lice level on juvenile wild salmon is highly questionable and likely to contribute to the continued decline of wild salmon. Stringent attempts to control lice from open net cages in Europe have so far not reversed decades of damage to wild fish.

- The call to fund commercial scale closed system aquaculture, which would prevent disease and parasite problems, is thus especially welcome, though the proposed definition of acceptable systems seems designed to fail. Also, the eco-certification and research programs proposed by the Forum may duplicate efforts already well established internationally; moreover, the expanded research recommendations, if accepted alone, will likely draw enormous resources into more waiting rather than action.
- The recommendation to cap farmed salmon production at current levels, while seeming like a fair compromise, would allow the same level of fish farm activity that created and still sustain the serious, scientifically documented, ecological problems we face today. Peer-reviewed evidence from BC, eastern Canada, and Europe, shows that a reduction in survival or abundance of wild salmon is related to an increased production of farmed salmon (Ford and Myers 2008). Therefore, a simple policy recommendation would be to decrease overall farm production as a measure to improve wild salmon health.
- The PSF recommends licencing the biocide SLICE as a continued and effective measure to improve wild salmon health by reducing lice loads during the juvenile out-migration period. However, SLICE is only approved for use through the Emergency Drug Release Program, which allows the use of non-approved drugs when recommended by veterinarians for emergency situations. SLICE is a crustacean-specific biocide that may have indirect effects on the wild crustacean species consumed by juvenile salmon during their early marine phase (such as barnacle, crab, prawn larvae, etc.), and these indirect effects have not been adequately researched. Sea lice have also begun to show resistance to SLICE in other salmon farming jurisdictions which brings into question the efficacy of it's use over the longer term.
- The recommendations fail to include the desires of many First Nations to have farms removed from their traditional territories, which have become production grounds for open-net salmon farms without their consent or consultation.
- The overall recommendations fail to suggest the effectiveness of closing farms as a simple measure to reduce impacts to wild salmon stocks. Several peer-reviewed articles and PSF's own research shows that some farms produce more lice and infect more wild fish than others. And in some regions with active salmon farms (such as the Northern Georgia Strait), closing problem farms may be the only effective way to reduce lice levels on wild juvenile salmon due to the influence of strong tidal currents, the travel ability of planktonic lice, and the high likelihood of farm re-infection.

Now comes the big test: will governments act on the advice of the council they empowered, and take immediate steps to bring relief to B.C.'s beleaguered wild salmon? Or will this be another report soon to be gathering dust on some backroom shelf?