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December 10, 2010

New Pacific Aquaculture Regulations pose major concerns, only marginal improvements

VANCOUVER, BC – The new Pacific Aquaculture Regulations, unveiled today in Vancouver by Fisheries Minister Gail Shea bring some areas of improvement over the previous Provincial regime. But the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform (CAAR) has major concerns around the transparency of industry reporting and lack of clarity concerning possible exemption from habitat destruction provisions of the Fisheries Act.

The new regulations state that the Minister *may* require the industry to publicly report fish health data therefore framing transparency as optional. Given the long-standing struggle on the part of conservation groups to obtain fish health data in order to fully assess net-cage impacts, an issue that took centre stage this week at the Cohen Inquiry into the Decline of Fraser River Sockeye, it's disturbing to see that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) didn't take advantage of the opportunity to entrench transparency into the new regulations. While DFO bureaucrats are promising increased transparency the absence of a clear mandate in the regulations is a serious omission.

"Transparency concerning fish health data on salmon farms is critical as was recently affirmed by Justice Bruce Cohen's ruling," says Stan Proboszcz of Watershed Watch Salmon Society and CAAR. "If DFO wants a management regime that rebuilds public confidence as they claim, transparency should be a cornerstone of the new aquaculture regulations."

Of great concern is a possible exemption of aquaculture facilities from authorizations under the Fisheries Act for Harmful Alteration, Disruption or Destruction (HADD) of fish habitat. These HADD Authorizations were a key element in DFO's "no net-loss policy" brought in more than two decades ago to prevent the loss of wild fish habitat.

"Exempting aquaculture operations, especially open net-cage operations from the need to compensate for their harmful effects on fish and fish habitat such as the release of wastes, chemicals and drug residues into the environment is a step backwards," says Will Soltau of Living Oceans Society and CAAR. "This issue requires clarification since, in the past, DFO recognized these harmful effects and required the industry to compensate by creating or restoring habitat elsewhere."

As most of the regulation will be done through conditions that the Minister of Fisheries & Oceans may attach to individual licenses, a final assessment of the overall management regime can't be completed until the license conditions are finalized. However, the biggest problem with the new regulations is that they allow for the ongoing use of net-cage salmon farms. CAAR continues to advocate for an industry-wide transition to more sustainable closed containment technology for salmon aquaculture.

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