

BRIEFING NOTE FOR DIRECTOR GENERAL OF HABITAT MANAGEMENT

**MEETING WITH THE BC SALMON FARMERS
ASSOCIATION REGARDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE AND AQUACULTURE**

(Information Only)

SUMMARY

- You will be meeting on May 4, 2005, with Mary Ellen Walling of the BC Salmon Growers Association (BCSGA), David Rideout of the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance, the Deputy Minister, and other senior DFO staff.
- The primary purpose of the meeting is to discuss the challenges facing the BC salmon farming industry with respect to public confidence in aquaculture practices, as well as in the government regulation of the industry.
- As lead federal department for aquaculture, DFO has explicitly committed to improving public confidence in aquaculture. To deliver on this commitment the department has undertaken several initiatives to raise public confidence in the context of aquaculture.
- Regulatory site reviews for aquaculture remain a challenge in BC. DFO continues to work with Transport Canada (TC), industry and provincial regulators to improve coordination and streamline assessments.

Background

- As lead federal agency for aquaculture, DFO has committed to raise public confidence in food safety and environmental protection in the context of aquaculture development. These commitments have come through the Minister's March 30, 2004, response to the Office of the Commissioner for Aquaculture Development final report, and in the 2004 ministerial workplan submitted by DFO to the Privy Council Office.

- At present, however, there is a growing crisis of public confidence around aquaculture. Media campaigns led by Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) have publicized various studies that have raised doubts regarding the safety of aquaculture products (e.g. contaminants such as PCBs), the environmental sustainability of the industry (e.g. sea lice impacts), and the federal government's will and capacity to effectively regulate the industry.
- As part of the department's efforts to address the public confidence issue, DFO held a series of focus groups across the country in early 2005. Being already aware of the arguments and views of opponents and supporters of the industry, the focus groups were intended to gauge opinions of average Canadians regarding aquaculture.
- Mary Ellen Walling of the BCSGA met with the Acting Regional Director General of the Pacific Region, the Regional Director of Communications, and the Regional Director of Aquaculture, during the week of April 27, 2004, to discuss the issue of public confidence in aquaculture in BC and the communications issues facing the BC industry.
- There also continue to be delays associated with the review of finfish aquaculture applications in Pacific Region. Of primary concern are the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* (CEAA) assessments of new and renewal sites, and the coordination between DFO and Transport Canada (TC) on these CEAA assessments.

Analysis / DFO Comment

Public Confidence:

- There are numerous initiatives underway within DFO to support improvements in the aquaculture industry, and to improve communication of relevant, balance aquaculture information. Initiatives include: working with like-minded cold-water aquaculture producing countries to address public confidence issues internationally, redesigning the DFO's on-line aquaculture presence, and developing a long-term proactive strategy for raising public confidence in aquaculture.
- Responsibility for these initiatives will be shared between Aquaculture Management Directorate and Communications Branch. Due to the scope of the public confidence crisis in the Pacific Region, however, it is recognized that regional Communications and Aquaculture Management staff will need to continue to manage the file and that a regional communications strategy may be required. National Headquarters (NHQ) remains available to support these regional initiatives.
- A key to the strategic approach to addressing confidence issues will be targeting information for the general public rather than trying to directly challenge the media campaigns being carried out by well funded ENGOS.

- Habitat Management NHQ has been approached by Communications Branch to provide input into the development of a fact sheet to communicate the regulatory requirements for monitoring and follow-up that are in place for aquaculture to protect the environment.
- Indications from Pacific Region are that the recent meeting with Mary Ellen Walling was positive and that industry seemed satisfied with the progress made at the meeting. The region committed to regular future meetings with Mary Ellen Walling.

Regulatory Site Reviews:

- Focus group findings suggest that DFO's regulatory approach to aquaculture must provide for accountability and transparency using scientifically-based and risk-based decision making. This is largely how the Habitat Management Program has sought to regulate the aquaculture industry, and is in line with the objectives of the Environmental Process Modernization Plan. Communication of this ongoing work will be key.
- The largest problems in BC with respect to site reviews have been related to the processing of renewals sites. DFO transferred all 97 renewals assessments with completed screening reports for each to TC for review and decision on January 7, 2005. There remains no progress on finalizing these assessments or moving forward with First Nations consultations as TC plans. In the absence of any explanation from TC or proposed timelines, industry's discomfort with these delays is growing.
- First Nations consultations for these files could potentially represent a long delay and large workload for DFO. As well, as delays continue, further complications of the renewals process are likely due to expiration of current conditional provincial licences, and changes being proposed by proponents to the existing before the reviews are completed.
- There had been some issues with processing of reviews for new site applications related to TC challenges to DFO screenings and conclusions on fisheries issues. This problem seems to have been resolved at the regional level.
- The Pacific Regional Director of Aquaculture continues to lead on discussions with TC, the province and Industry on CEAA assessments even though, since leaving the Habitat and Enhancement Branch, the Regional Aquaculture Management office no longer has responsibility for these reviews.

Recommendations / Next Steps

- Habitat Management NHQ will continue to input into the departmental communications plan for aquaculture (including the development of a fact sheet on environmental monitoring and follow-up), and communicate with and provide support to the Pacific

Aquaculture Management office on the issue of site reviews and CEEA assessments.

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