



Collaboration key to aquaculture industry success in BC
By Clare Backman

Marine Harvest is BC's largest aquaculture company, employing 500 people on the north Island and producing more than half of the 80,000 tonnes of fresh salmon produced in the province each year. We believe it is important that our communities have current and accurate information on our company and public aquaculture issues.

Marine Harvest people have been busy over the last year or two. We have completed two mergers and established the Company as a substantial and successful export business that will be an important part of BC for a long time. We have also begun collaboration with environmental organizations and with several First Nations as we all try to learn from each other while sharing a commitment to sustainability.

But it is hard work. For instance, our dialogue with the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform (CAAR) over the last two years has not always been easy or predictable. But we have made progress on several important fronts and have come to better respect each others' views. In October we agreed on the terms of reference for new research projects on the interactions of farmed fish, sea lice, and wild salmon. This is significant for it means that both sides will see the results of research in which we have jointly established the criteria, thereby eliminating the "dueling scientists" the public have all too often had to put up with when the environmental community points to its research results and the industry counters with an opposing viewpoint.

We are also pleased by burgeoning First Nation relationships, from our joint venture with the Kitsoo people at Klemtu to our Protocol Agreement with the Quatsino Band signed in 2006 and our support services contract with the Mamalilikulla-Qwe'Qwa'Sot'Em Band now in its fifth year.

We clearly understand that collaboration and cooperation will get all of us—the industry, First Nations, communities, environmental interests—down the road to a sustainable industry with strong public acceptance much faster than the old ways of confrontation and argument.

It is also increasingly clear that the global demand for fresh and healthy seafood is growing steadily and far outweighs the ability of the world's wild fish stocks to provide the products we all look for. In fact, about one-third of the world's demand for seafood is now being met through aquaculture and there is every reason to believe this ratio will

keep increasing as will calls to reduce fishing wild stocks—including BC's Pacific salmon.

There is an often made point—one that cries out for clarity—that holds that sea lice originating from farmed salmon are a leading cause of decline in wild salmon. This argument was used most recently in an open letter to Prime Minister Harper and Premier Campbell signed by 18 like-minded academics, researchers and scientists. They claim that there is a weight of scientific evidence confirming that migrating juvenile salmon passing near salmon farms are being infected by lice and that up to 95% are killed as a result. This remains a hypothetical assertion that's a long way from a proven fact.

In its 2007 interim report BC's Pacific Salmon Forum stated: "A scientific consensus on the role of sea lice in the interactions between salmon farms and wild salmon populations has yet to be reached." (www.pacificsalmonforum.ca) The plain fact is that the mortality rate of juvenile pink salmon has historically been extremely high, usually greater than 90% according to federal fisheries scientists with many factors involved from predatory seals, fish, and other species to the effects of natural disease, condition of nursery streams, and commercial interception. To some as yet unknown extent, sea lice may contribute to the overall mortality, but many specialists observe that the other factors likely play a larger role in determining survival of pink salmon in the ocean.

Then there's the proposal by some that closed containment technology can be used to eliminate environmental risk. In simple terms the proposed technology would separate farmed salmon from the ocean by using land-based or floating tanks. There's nothing new about closed containment from home aquariums to the freshwater tanks we use at our hatcheries to raise salmon smolts. But employing closed containment technology on a commercial scale poses some significant engineering and management problems. To date not a single closed containment technology tested anywhere in the world has proved technically robust or economically viable for eliminating all potential impacts while growing marketable salmon.

It is also important to keep in mind that the environmental performance of BC net cage salmon farms, operating under a suite of new regulations, is amongst the highest in the world. Marine Harvest currently meets and in many cases exceeds the requirements of regulation.

Having said this, Marine Harvest Canada and CAAR are engaged in developing a research project that will seek to compare existing salmon farming technology with new and emerging closed tank technology. The project includes a review of what is known about past and existing technologies, to be followed by a comparison of the social, environmental, and economic performance of open net cage and closed tank technologies. We believe this will provide the most comprehensive review contrasting the two technologies ever undertaken.

Marine Harvest is committed to continual improvement of our practices and to employing technological advancements in our operations and we actively monitor the development of new operational practices and equipment. We believe that research and development leading to technological innovation is key to our commitment to continual improvement. Further we know that collaboration and cooperation with stakeholders, and learning by doing is the pathway to sustainability—economic and environmental.

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