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Media Contact:
Clare Backman, 250-850-3276 ext 7258

More facts needed in salmon debate Inaccurate charges mar discussions over future of B.C.'s fish farms

By Clare Backman
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What is a stronger icon of British Columbia than the Pacific salmon?

Not much. Maybe a grizzly, or the Lions Gate Bridge, or Long Beach.

Whatever your answer, we can be reasonably certain that preserving Pacific salmon for future generations is important to everyone in the province, especially those of us who live on the Island and on the coast.

This includes the 500-plus people who work at Marine Harvest Canada, now the largest private employer on the north half of the Island and the largest aquaculture company in B.C.

Objective and fair criticism of our business is welcome. We receive lots of it through the news media and our website or via Twitter and Facebook. Off-base or wild assertions come our way too, and we do our best to respond with an open mind.

In running our business we have to stick with the facts as we understand them and use the best available science to guide our management decisions. We cannot react to every assertion that is made of every opinion that is presented.

Headlines and editorials in the Times Colonist tell us that the decline in Fraser River sockeye in 2009 is a major public concern -- and so it should be.

Some observers have already pointed to warmer oceans with less food for the sockeye to eat in 2007 and 2008.

Others ask just how many of these fish never make it back to B.C. waters because they are scooped up in the Bering Sea. Another challenge facing juvenile sockeye is the state of the urbanized and industrialized Fraser River estuary.

This is assuredly not the first time that sockeye have failed to return to the Fraser in the numbers expected. It is the first time, however, that the critics-of-aquaculture crowd has pitched the media with their default finger-pointing at our salmon farms.

The health of the Fraser River sockeye and other Pacific salmon stocks is a serious public issue that merits a serious and informed public discussion. Uninformed and inaccurate opinions and



assertions should not be the basis of public policy debates or, frankly, coverage in mainstream and responsible media like the Times Colonist.

Our obligation to the communities where we operate, such as Campbell River, Port Hardy and the Comox Valley, is to listen to concerns and to behave responsibly in minimizing our environmental impacts while providing stable employment that benefits hundreds of families.

After years of listening and participating in studies, it is clear to responsible and knowledgeable fisheries biologists that the weight of scientific evidence lands on a few key points:

- Sea lice can damage or kill very small pink salmon; sockeye migrating past the Discovery Islands are much larger than the threshold risk.
- There is scant evidence that sea lice can cause population level declines of salmon; remember the "almost extinct" pink salmon in the Broughton? They are so numerous this year that a fishery was allowed.
- There is no tracking system to know just where and how numerous the Fraser River sockeye are during their migration, although this is a technology we would all like to see available.

And this brings us to the heart of the matter: Regardless of what we do not know about the causes of low survival of our wild salmon, we all need to work together to learn how to better protect them.

Our commitment to environmental, social, and economic sustainability is key to our business. If this means different management of our farms to further conserve and protect wild salmon, that is exactly what we will do. If we discover that other causes are at fault, we expect that all interested stakeholders will come together to find workable solutions.

Finally, the demand for salmon is growing by five per cent every year, and this includes B.C. consumers. Salmon's health benefits are clear and widely known. We all know that the wild fisheries cannot meet this demand and, in fact, could not make up the 79,000 tonnes of salmon produced each year by B.C.'s aquaculture industry.

Surely encouraging a sustainable salmon aquaculture industry in B.C. is one of the very best ways to lessen pressure on our wild stocks.

Clare Backman is director of environmental relations at Marine Harvest Canada.

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