

Salmon farming in B.C. after the first quarter-century

BY CLARE BACKMAN

Salmon farming started in British Columbia about 25 years ago, growing rapidly to become an important coastal industry. From the outset, it was embraced by many and criticized by others.

While public messaging indicates that strong opinions remain, what has this industry achieved in its first quarter-century?

Farmed salmon is now British Columbia's biggest agricultural export with 79,000 tonnes processed in 2007. Of this total, Marine Harvest Canada produced 40,000 tonnes and every kilogram of fresh Atlantic salmon from our B.C. operations had a waiting buyer.

Global consumer demand for salmon is increasing by five per cent every year. Its health benefits are clear and it is now affordable and available fresh year-round, thanks to aquaculture. It is an encouraging future.

Today, Marine Harvest directly employs 530 people, making us the biggest private sector employer on northern Vancouver Island. In addition there are hundreds of suppliers, contractors, and others who depend on us for their livelihoods.

One example is our partnership with the Kitasoo/Xai'xais people at Klemtu, a remote village about 500 km north of Vancouver.

In 1997, the community agreed to work with us to build a successful aquaculture business. Today, 60 band members work on six farm sites, at the processing plant, and in support roles

to grow and process 5,000 tonnes of Atlantic salmon annually.

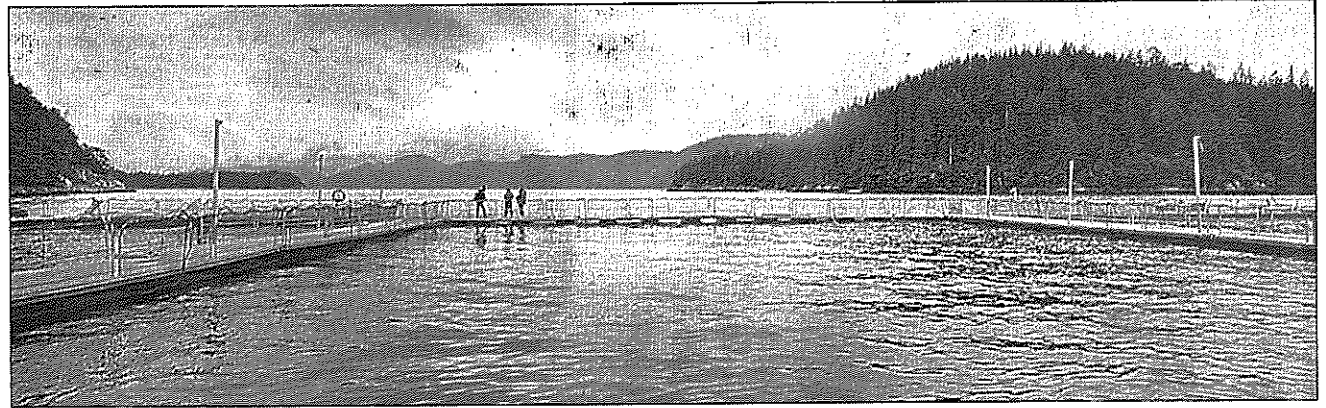
Coast-wide, we have protocol agreements in place or under discussion with 12 of the 20 first nations in whose traditional territories we operate. Some first nations remain opposed to salmon farming, and we do our best to respect their views in the management of our operations.

Our obligation to the communities where we operate like 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 with benefits for hundreds of families.

None of us want contaminants in the food we eat. Our fish are fed a diet that contains fish, soy and vegetable proteins with all ingredients tested to ensure their high quality and safety.

Today the amount of fish used to produce a kilogram of salmon has been halved from about three kilograms to the present level of about 1.4 kilograms. Our goal is to be a net producer growing more than a kilogram of salmon from each kilogram of fish used in our feed.

Advancements in health management, including vaccinating each fish at the hatchery, have significantly reduced the need for veterinarian prescribed antibiotics to control disease. The majority of our fish never receive



BILL KEAY/VANCOUVER SUN FILES

Marine Harvest Canada fish farm for Atlantic salmon at Doctor Islets in the Broughton Archipelago.

an antibiotic treatment in the 16 months prior to harvest.

Marine Harvest regularly meets with environmental organizations regarding concerns about the health of wild salmon stocks on our coast, and the potential impacts of our business on the marine environment. We support volunteer salmon enhancement groups with funding and equipment.

Marine eel grass habitat restoration work has been carried out in several locations and we actively support research to better understand issues such as sea lice and closed containment.

Sea lice are common, naturally occurring parasites of wild fish. We strictly control the sea lice levels on our farmed salmon during the out-migration of juvenile wild salmon. Our

active management shows a continuing pattern of reduced lice numbers on our fish and we post these results on our web site.

We continue to pursue new developments in culture technology that will protect our fish from plankton blooms, sea lice or water-borne diseases and reduce impacts to the environment. In 2002, Marine Harvest ran a closed containment system on Saltspring Island that failed. Other systems are being developed and we support a public-private pilot test that will evaluate their feasibility and what the environmental advantages and impacts of closed containment might be (any such system is likely to be a huge user of energy, for example) as compared to modern open net cage systems.

We intend to grow our business pru-

dently to keep pace with the growing demand for salmon. But we can only do this if it makes good business sense and if we have earned the confidence from the public that says Marine Harvest is a welcome and responsible contributor to the province.

Our commitment to environmental, social and financial sustainability is important. It is also an investment that clearly adds to our operating costs making it harder to compete with other salmon producing areas such as Chile or Norway.

But it is a commitment that has helped create the success of the last 25 years in B.C. and will allow us to continue that success in the years ahead.

Clare Backman is the director of environmental relations at Marine Harvest Canada in Campbell River.