

THE QUEENS COUNTY ADVANCE

Cook Aquaculture speaks out on protest

By Kelly Brooks

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Open-pen fish farming has been a controversial issue in various areas of Nova Scotia over the past few years, but Cooke Aquaculture stresses they too have an interest in keeping the environment healthy.

Recent protesting efforts against Cooke Aquaculture's fish farm change from trout to salmon has brought forward the company's concern that the community doesn't understand how they work.

Two weeks ago Cooke Aquaculture sent trucks to transport young

salmon from Port Medway harbour to the farm off Coffin Island. President of the Medway River Salmon Association Darrell Tingley, and some other members of the association, arrived at the wharf to protest Friday, June 24 and Saturday, June 25.

Although there was an issue with Tingley trying to physically disrupt the truck, vice president of Cooke Aquaculture communications Nell Halse says the other gentlemen at the wharf were respectful of the process. Many actually stayed behind and were interested to hear more about Cooke's operations;

what they were doing and why.

“The manager was able to show them how we move fish out of a truck,” says Halse. “Those fish are taken directly to the farm and pumped directly into the cages, there is no opportunity for losing fish in the transportation itself.”

Halse says the process of transporting the fish is done safely and carefully, and the farms are also preventative of losing fish. In fact, Cooke Aquaculture has not had an incident of fish escape from one of their farms for more than six years.

“We’ve not had incidents since 2005 in salmon escaping from one of

our farms,” she says. “Even before there were reporting requirements, we voluntarily reported whenever we did have an incident. The Atlantic Salmon Federation and various conservation groups can certainly testify to that, that we’ve been very upfront in sharing information.”

The farm off Coffin Island has been licensed for both trout and salmon for a long time, says Halse. Cooke Aquaculture bought the farm, and despite the growing concern of the community, there has been no change.

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“Basically we are now going to be operating the farm off Coffin Island, and the other company, Ocean Trout Farms, is going to operate one of our farms in Shelburne Harbour,” says Halse. “It’s a business transaction between two companies where we are exchanging assets, which are duly licensed for both trout and salmon.”

Halse says there has been some discussion as to why there has been no consultation about the farm. When a company applies for a new farm or makes boundary amendments to an existing farm, they are required to do a full environmental assessment and consultations. However, Halse says this is not applicable to the farm off Coffin Island.

“There’s no need to do a consultation with people. We haven’t asked for a new farm in the area, this farm has been there a long time and it’s had both salmon and trout on it before,” she says. “We notified some local stakeholders just so they were aware, and we started moving fish with all the necessary permits in place.”

Cooke Aquaculture has been in business for 25 years, and has been farming salmon for all of that time. Halse says the company is fully integrated, with their own hatcheries, farms, processing plants, and they make their own equipment.

“Our farming managers have been able to work very closely with our equipment designers and engineers, and we’ve been

modifying equipment and making it stronger and more suitable to some of the open ocean environments where we farm today,” she says.

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– Nell Halse, Cooke Aquaculture

Halse says there are a lot of people who would like to see economic development

in Southwest Nova, who see a desperate need for it, and Cooke is prepared to make investments and grow their business. However, the company is not doing this on a short-term basis.

“We’re not doing it so that we’re just going to come in, use the resource, then leave. We’re there for the long term,” she says. “We’ve been there for 15 years in Nova Scotia already. We have a history. We’re not newcomers.”

Thousands of people involved with Cooke Aquaculture have a long history of fishing in their background, whether they were fishermen themselves or they grew up in a fishing community. Halse says these are people who are not going to support a business that will destroy their marine heritage. The Cooke company, owners, and employees share the serious concern of conservation.

“I think what the big message is for us, that we’re not two solitudes here. This greedy company on the one hand and conservation and environmentalists on the other,” says Halse. “We are also very concerned about conservation and environmental health. In fact, we can’t grow our fish in the ocean if it’s not a healthy environment.”

Halse says Cooke has a lot of expertise that can go towards helping conservation, and extend their offer to the Nova Scotia Salmon Council. Just like they have done in New Brunswick, Cooke

would like to discuss and identify ways they can help.

With regard to the Medway River Salmon Association, Halse says Cooke Aquaculture would like to sit down speak with them not only to try and understand what their concerns are, but to have the opportunity to explain and show how Cooke is addressing those concerns.

“How we are containing our fish, how we are keeping them healthy, how we are using local stocks,” says Halse. “And is there a way we can help them with their projects to return the wild salmon to the rivers.”

Halse also says talking to the concerned public is also something the company would like to do. She says Cooke understands people have concerns that need to be addressed properly.

“They have concerns about wild salmon, they have concerns about the environment, and they are important and legitimate concerns,” says Halse. “We understand that our industry is always going to be under intense scrutiny because we’re working in the ocean which is a public resource, but we do have licenses and permits to farm. We want to be able to go about our business, but do it responsibly with the support of the community.”

Halse says anyone looking for more information on Cooke Aquaculture can visit www.aquaculturegrowsns.com

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RESPONSE FROM DARRELL TINGLEY
PRESIDENT
MEDWAY RIVER SALMON ASSOCIATION

"That was a warm and fuzzy letter from Cooke's Aquaculture PR person in the July 5, 2011 edition of the Advance. Now let's talk some hard facts."

The sale of Ocean Trout Farms to Cooke was never made public and Cooke's trucks arrived into Port Medway un-announced to off load hundreds of thousands of salmon smolts for the Coffin Island site. Why did the Minister of Fisheries and Cooke Aquaculture skulk around in the dark of night devising this nefarious scheme? What did they have to hide?

The feces from the last Rainbow Trout had hardly hit the ocean floor at the Coffin Island site when the first salmon smolt arrived. Why did the Minister of Fisheries and Cooke Aquaculture move so quickly? Would it not have been wiser to allow the site to lay fallow for 6 months, 1 year before proceeding?

Cooke's PR person fails to mention that the farm is like a sieve for escapees. 500,000 trout escaped during Hurricane Juan and showed up in Rivers from the Mersey in Queens County to the Musquidoboit River on the Eastern Shore. Another 13,000 trout escaped in March/April 2010 as a result of seals penetrating the nets. Why did the Minister of Fisheries and Cooke Aquaculture proceed before ensuring that future escapees will be prevented?

Cooke's PR person fails to mention the dump truck loads of dead Rainbow Trout making their way on a regular basis to the landfill site on highway 8. Of course the local population would still be in the dark if a dump truck hadn't overturned and dumped its load on the highway. I guess the little devils freeze their noses in the cold Atlantic waters and die.

Cooke's PR person fails to mention the disastrous effect of inter breeding of farmed vs wild salmon. In fact, she misleads the public by saying they are using local stock. The stock placed into the open pens off Coffin Island are Saint John, N.B. River Stock which are as foreign as if they came from Norway or Russia.

Cooke's PR person fails to mention why they abandoned their operation at Port Mouton. If it was efficient, clean, disease free and viable, why did they close it?

How many salmon smolt did they cram into the Coffin Island site? 500,000; 600,000; 750,000; 1,000,000?

Not one mention that the food used at the fish farm is "fish" based, full of antibiotics & colouring (otherwise the salmon would be white). That the fish are bathed in Hydrogen Peroxide to kill off the sea lice and other parasites. What happens to the dead sea lice, parasites and Hydrogen Peroxide when returned to the ocean?

Not once in this article or at any other time has Cooke Aquaculture ever mentioned of moving some or all of their operation to a land based closed containment site. No escapes, no Hydrogen Peroxide baths, no "freezing" noses... yes, less per contained site, however, a safe, clean environment for all to enjoy and harvest lobsters and shellfish. No need to divide communities and force people to take sides on whether or not a processing plant will be built. Build the processing plant in Shelburne and several contained sites adjacent to the plant. A much better solution for the planet.

Maybe its time the Minister of Fisheries/Environment took a step back and placed a moratorium on any further ocean sites until the matter is more closely looked at. Rome wasn't built in a day and neither should open pen fish farming on the Atlantic side of Nova Scotia. Err on the side of caution and for all residents of Nova Scotia even if it means non resident corporations have to cool their jets!

Darrell Tingley
President, Medway River Salmon Association.