

THE QUEENS COUNTY ADVANCE



President of the Medway River Salmon Association Darrell Tingley stands in protest by the Cooke boat Friday, June 24, where truckloads of juvenile salmon get loaded onto and shipped to an open pen fish farm off of Coffin Island. Kelly Brooks photo

Fish farm change draws protest

By Kelly Brooks
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The Medway River Salmon Association has been working hard to help repopulate wild Atlantic salmon on the South Shore, but salmon raised in open-pen fish farms could be a threat to this effort.

Early last week president of the Medway Salmon Association Darrell Tingley was informed that six to eight truckloads of juvenile salmon had been shipped from New Brunswick to Port Medway. These young fish were then piped onto a Cooke Aquaculture ship for placement in an

open pen fish farm off Coffin Island.

"We heard from a local person that Cooke had bought the ocean farms, which was a trout farm off of Coffin Island, and they were going to convert it from rearing trout to rearing salmon," said Tingley. "That gave us great concern because the Medway River is right here through the harbor."

Escaping salmon are a common occurrence at this farm, said Tingley, which brings danger to wild Atlantic salmon. During hurricane Juan, 500,000 trout escaped and ended up in areas from the Mersey River right down to the Musquodoboit River. Last

year the seals destroyed part of the netting system in March and April, allowing 13,000 more trout to escape.

"If there's any escapes of the salmon from the farm, they will come in and interbreed with the wild stalk," he said. "That will diminish the quality of the stock, and probably could ruin the wild Atlantic salmon that go in the Medway River."

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Inland Fisheries, and provincial politicians were all contacted and alerted to the concerns of the association, but Tingley said no word of action came back.

Continued on Page 2

Fish... Cont. from Page 1

Taking matters into their own hands, Tingley and George Mansfield of the Environment Committee and Medway River Salmon Association sent out a notice Friday morning asking all those available to join them in a protest to stop the trucks.

"We have no assurance or guarantees they're going to come and stop it," said Tingley Friday morning. "So we're here to stop it by being in front of the trucks when they arrive."

Because of the high tides, the trucks didn't come to unload the salmon Friday morning. However, they did unload the fish Saturday morning, and Tingley was there to make his point.

"As a second truck was backing up Darrell Tingley pulled in and preceded to stand behind the truck that was backing up," said Queens RCMP Corporal Victor Whalen. "Of course the truck then had to stop. From there I removed Mr. Tingley off to the side of the wharf where I talked to him and tried to reason with him."

Whalen said he informed Tingley he was permitted to stand and protest as long as he didn't interfere with the truck, as Cooke Aquaculture have all required permits in place.

"He got a little bit better, although he wasn't happy with it happening," said Whalen. "The truck then proceeded to do his unload."

Whalen said the association was able to get a water sample from the Cooke truck to give to the Department of Environment for testing purposes, and everything continued smoothly.

"I've talked to some of the local gentlemen here with the salmon association who have concerns, but also realize that these guys with Cookes Aquaculture are just doing their job," says Whalen. "They know they can't get in the way, and they know they need to bring it to the attention of government if they want to see changes."

Tingley said the issue in Port Medway

is the process of loading the fish from the truck into the tanks on the boat. The transfer risks spillage of the salmon into the water both in the harbour, and again at the fish farm site. Tingley said he was told there has already been one spill last week.

The main concern of the Medway Salmon Association is the potential of escape. The salmon going to the fish farm are from Saint John, New Brunswick and have all been bred and fed in captivity for the purpose of being sold to the food industry. Because these fish are from a different area and have been raised on a fish farm, an escape is dangerous for wild Atlantic salmon.

"The salmon will go into the harbour here, they'll end up in our river, and eventually if they live they'll grow to maturity and then interbreed," said Tingley. "The genetics of the wild stock becomes depleted. Who knows what will happen to our stock if there's interbreeding? It could be the end."

In addition to the dangers of interbreeding, an escape also poses a high risk of infection to wild salmon. Tingley said farms can have 700,000, and in some cases up to 1-million fish in the ocean pens. With such a large concentration of fish, the potential of parasite disease or lice is great.

"If wild salmon go by, these lice and parasites will attach themselves," said Tingley.

Another major concern for the association is the risk that all their hard work and success in restoring the salmon population over the past few years will be lost. Although the effects of interbreeding would not be seen right away, Tingley said eventually everything they worked on could be gone.

"It all could be wiped out with having this farm here. Having a spillage of the fish as they load the boat here, or spillage once they take the fish from here out to the ocean, or one of the Atlantic Storms blows it apart like hurricane Juan, or seals keep gnawing away at the nets," said Tingley. "The ocean shouldn't be robbed of the potential to keep the wild fish alive, be it salmon, be it whatever species that is out

there."

The Medway Salmon Association is not the only group worried about the possible effects of this now-salmon farm. Tingley said fishermen, both of salmon and other species, are uneasy as well.

"There are other concerns for the lobster fishers, shellfish harvesters and that, that the pollution from the farm itself will ruin the ocean store and the feeding and reproduction grounds for the lobster," said Tingley. "They have their own concerns."

Tingley said best-case scenario for the association is for the open pen farm off of Coffin Island to be placed on shore.

"To get them moved from the ocean where there can be escapes, where disease can be passed on to the wild stock, where it can harm the environment and ecology of the ocean," said Tingley. "That would be the optimum not only for ourselves, but I think the other fishers."

In order for this to happen, Tingley said he thinks it needs to be through public opposition. There have already been a growing number of protests against open pen fish farming throughout the province, including St. Mary's Bay, the Bay of Fundy, and Shelburne.

"This is becoming a bigger issue in the minds of the community. People are now recognizing how big this is, and how big a danger this is," said Tingley. "Eventually I think they're going to have to listen, because people are just not going to allow it."

Tingley said the association hopes opposition to the farm converting from trout to salmon is raised, because of the danger it poses to the rivers of Queens County.

"The government has to take a serious look at this and basically say it's not environmentally sustainable, then take it from there and give instructions to move it from the ocean to land," said Tingley. "That would be our wish, and that would be the wish I think of the rest of the people who are in opposition of open-pen fish farming."

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