

Mersey Biodiversity Facility on last legs

Group still pushing to save it

By Nick Moase

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A Milton facility that was once on the forefront of recovery efforts for Atlantic salmon and the endangered Atlantic whitefish could soon be no more.

In early 2012, the federal government announced they were shuttering the Mersey Biodiversity Facility in the latest round of government cuts. It was scheduled to be phased out by April 2014, but tenders for demolition have already been called.

The Mersey Biodiversity Facility Supporters Society, formed earlier this year, is hoping to head off the demolition. The society was formed out of the Medway River Salmon Association, to see if there was interest in saving the hatchery, and take it over.

Mike Fralic, chair of the society, says the support was immediate and they brought together several organizations in the area that were keen on making a plan to save the facility.

"This facility is a gem of a facility," he says.

Fralic says the Mersey Biodiversity Facility has a world-class reputation, and is known for its healthy and productive environment for raising fish.

The group put forward a professionally made proposal to take control of the facility as a non-profit entity, to continue the work of conserving, protecting and enhancing salmon on the rivers. They would do this with the approval of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, with all the proper licensing, and would work with the government organization to make those goals come true.

That application was denied, although no reason was given, says Fralic.

The society is now pushing the government for clarification on why their application was rejected, and if they would allow a non-profit to run the facility.

In the meantime, the group is also keeping an open dialogue with Nova Scotia Power, the owners of the land around the site.

The matter has become urgent, since tenders to demolish part of the site have already been called. Once awarded, Fralic expects demolition to begin this month.

Adding to the frustration is how limited recovery efforts in Atlantic Canada will become if they cannot save the facility.

Continued on Page 2

Biodiversity . . . Cont. from Page 1

Fralic pointed out that British Columbia has 23 hatcheries for their salmon. If the Mersey facility closes Nova Scotia will have one federal facility with Coldbrook, one provincial facility that focuses on the Margaree River, and one other part time facility.

The land it sits on is leased from Nova Scotia Power, and will be turned over to them when the shut down is complete. Nova Scotia Power will be responsible for the fate of some of the buildings, according to a government spokesperson.

The provincial government under the NDP had been advocating for more time, but the new Liberal government has said it is a federal issue.

David Dagley, secretary for the Queens Fish and Game Association and their representative on the society, says there has been too much valuable work done at the site to see it be torn down.

The Fish and Game Association has

worked for many years with the facility, by contributing \$1.5 million over the years to help with upgrades and working with staff to release the fish back into the wild.

"We would like to see salmon return to an angling experience, where there are sufficient salmon available to allow that," says Dagley.

As an added frustration, Atlantic salmon are being considered for the endangered species list, and this facility would help in the recovery efforts.

"The infrastructure needs to be in place to support the rebuilding of the stock," says Dagley.

If the government refuses the society's proposal, then there is very limited recovery options in Nova Scotia.

"If that happens, we can only complain that the government has not wisely spent tax dollars and that they are abandoning their support for Atlantic Salmon in Nova Scotia."