

## Anatomy of Mersey hatchery's destruction

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Atlantic salmon in Nova Scotia are in trouble, and Fisheries and Oceans is a big part of that problem.

In May of 2013, the Mersey Bio-diversity Facility Supporters Society (MBFSS) was formed and registered with Joint Stocks as a result of concerns of the Medway River Salmon Association.

Numerous watershed and conservation groups joined this new society, with the support of both the Nova Scotia Salmon Association and the Atlantic Salmon Federation.

The goal was to operate the Mersey facility and resume salmon and whitefish support at the Mersey Biodiversity Facility, which DFO had decided to close as a budget measure.

Knowledgeable and experienced individuals were solicited to help in this effort. Salmon populations had collapsed, and salmon angling in most of our rivers was closed. Unfortunately, DFO has now left salmon and endangered Atlantic whitefish to survive on their own.

With a DFO commitment in the 1980s to operate the Mersey facility for the long term, Queens County Fish and Game Association accessed \$1.5 million to upgrade and triple Mersey facility fish production.

DFO has spent almost \$2 million since 2002 to fully modernize this "world class" facility. Its replacement cost is now estimated to be about \$14 million.

DFO operates 26 hatcheries in British Columbia, and none have been closed within the last 20 years. The other remaining DFO facility at Coldbrook is too small to even partially meet the need created by the Mersey closure.

Coldbrook has limited cold well water issues, that will cost significant taxpayers' dollars to mitigate. As recently as Feb. 7, DFO has advised that the capacity to support additional adult salmon programs at Coldbrook in 2014 will be less than 50 adults. Our worst fears have materialized.

Early in 2013, the MBFSS quickly gained the support of MP Gerald Keddy to inform the fisheries minister of the importance of the Mersey facility. Ottawa attempted to seek solutions through DFO Halifax, but was met with the same resistance that the MBFSS had encountered from DFO regional director general, Faith Scattolon.

In the fall of 2013, support from Ottawa was virtually non-existent. Fisheries Minister Gail Shea was reluctant to issue a directive for Halifax DFO staff to continue to operate Mersey, or even support the efforts of the MBFSS.

Please keep in mind that it is DFO policy to foster partnerships with volunteer groups that support DFO mandates. The landowner, Nova Scotia Power, was approached. It told the society to talk to DFO about the closure and operating the facility. DFO told the MBFSS to talk to NSP. The society was constantly treated like a ping pong ball.

Operating a facility such as Mersey requires river-specific fishing permits to collect fish, as well as

“introductions and transfer permits” to raise and release fish back to the same rivers.

The MBFSS submitted applications for each river to be supported, including a species-at-risk application for Atlantic whitefish. All were rejected by DFO as incomplete.

After we sought clarification, DFO took a month to advise that it would not want any involvement with the fish. The society removed the mutual-collaboration wording, and resubmitted revised applications to DFO in December 2013.

At this point, DFO has not advised the society of an approval or rejection of those applications. It now seems that DFO was only buying time to get the destruction phase completed.

Without required permits, the MBFSS is not able to operate a hatchery. A tentative letter of potential operating approval from DFO Halifax would have supported funder confidence.

However, the society was able to find significant donor support without it. Meaningful discussion was not able to occur to have DFO set de-commissioning money aside in trust, for a later date. Another six months would have been reasonable.

NSP lease language required that DFO must mitigate all liabilities at the Mersey facility, once the hatchery property is no longer being maintained by DFO. Ratepayers were not to be saddled with these future expenses. DFO stated that it would not stop decommissioning, because NSP told them it was necessary.

The society was caught in the middle of what now appears to be a struggle by both parties to destroy the facility. It should be noted that in 1997, DFO divested the Mersey facility, and took a very active role in ensuring that a new operator was found for this valuable facility. DFO regained control of the Mersey facility in 2000.

DFO removed all fish from the Mersey facility in May 2013. All equipment and materials that could possibly be used at Coldbook, or the DFO Mactaquac facility in New Brunswick, were removed from the site.

We are not aware of the present storage location of DFO-removed equipment — if it is in a snow bank, or whether it will be destroyed in the future.

Many remaining assets were tendered out for destruction. Hundreds of thousands of dollars of nearly new equipment was smashed by excavators and hauled away.

Taxpayers have not been served well during this process, as money could have been recovered through a sale or tender of assets. In the last few weeks, gravel has been placed in the rearing ponds. It will require several hundred thousand dollars to restore ponds to a usable condition.

In January 2014, a memo was sent to Ms. Scattolon, requesting clarification of DFO’s position on the potential for the society to operate Mersey.

A response came back on Jan. 21, stating that the question should be asked to NSP, and that DFO was continuing with decommissioning. A memo had been written to Terry Toner asking him for NSP’s position on the same question. Mr. Toner responded on Jan. 17 that the society should contact DFO. On Jan. 22, a memo was sent to both NSP and DFO explaining that we were looking for answers.

With no answer being received, a memo was written to Neera Ritcey of NSP on Jan. 30, asking that a response be sent to our inquiry. As of this date, the society has not received any response from NSP or DFO, and no notice stating that the facility has been infilled.

As volunteers, society members are very disappointed with the unprofessional manner in which DFO and NSP have both treated us.

What have we lost?

Research and fish culture at a “world class” Mersey facility previously determined that acid rain was killing Nova Scotia Atlantic salmon stocks, leading to negotiation of the Canada-U.S. Clean Air Agreement.

The first one-year salmon smolts raised in North America were cultured at Mersey in naturally sourced, unheated water. Mersey was also the first facility in the world to develop new techniques for the culture of Atlantic whitefish, and the only facility to successfully breed and raise endangered Atlantic whitefish.

We can assure everyone that we did our best to get the job done. The decision and final outcome was not within our control. We would like to thank those who supported our efforts, the media, and elected officials who have taken an interest in this Mersey effort.

This spring, the minister of Fisheries will be making a decision on the endangered listing of Atlantic salmon in the southern uplands of Nova Scotia, or not, and on whether a recovery plan will be required.

We are hopeful that salmon will receive the support they require, but we are very concerned that this may not occur under the existing DFO management regime.

Things could have turned out so much better for our salmon and whitefish, with the proper level of support by DFO staff.

**Michael Fralic is chair of the Mersey Biodiversity Facility Supporters Society, Liverpool, Nova Scotia**