

EDITORIAL: Give locals a chance with Mersey hatchery

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It's no secret that Atlantic salmon stocks in many Nova Scotia rivers are in desperate shape.

That's why Ottawa is now in the midst of a process that could see Atlantic salmon stocks in Nova Scotia's Southern Uplands (south of Canso and Cape Split) and Eastern Cape Breton regions listed as endangered, as had been recommended in 2010 by an independent committee of experts — the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) — that advises the federal government.

Atlantic salmon in rivers in Nova Scotia's Inner Bay of Fundy have already been declared endangered. In the U.S., Atlantic salmon are listed as endangered in a number of Maine rivers.

All of which makes the refusal, thus far, by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to allow a well-regarded community group to take over operation of the former DFO Mersey Biodiversity Facility — once a hatchery and gene bank for Atlantic salmon and whitefish — all the more puzzling.

Since DFO first announced the hatchery's closure in 2012, the fish have been moved, labs removed and buildings torn down. All this as the Mersey Biodiversity Facility Supporters Society (MBFSS), an umbrella group formed earlier this year out of the Medway River Salmon Association, has unsuccessfully tried to obtain the necessary permits from DFO to operate the hatchery.

The site is on land owned by, and in the past leased from, Nova Scotia Power. Understandably, NSP wanted the group to obtain those DFO permits before agreeing to anything.

There are two points to be made here.

First, DFO has cited cost-cutting as the reason for the closure. That may be short-sighted, for if more Atlantic salmon stocks in Nova Scotia are declared endangered, a mandated recovery plan might well require resources like the former Mersey facility.

Second, regardless of whether DFO is making a strategic mistake, what's the point in denying community groups that are both interested and informed regarding preserving Atlantic salmon stocks from taking over the site?

South Shore-St. Margaret's Bay Conservative MP Gerald Keddy says Ottawa does support community groups taking over the hatchery. But unless and until DFO issues the necessary permits, that's just talk.

Once the final phase of decommissioning occurs — cementing the ponds and intake water pipes — the site's usefulness as a hatchery will have been destroyed. That work is to be completed by spring, if not sooner.

Atlantic salmon already face daunting challenges, from acid rain to overfishing off Greenland. If the Mersey society thinks the hatchery can help preserve stocks, why stand in its way?