

Something fishy

*LaHave salmon returns in 2009
were lowest ever recorded*

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COUNTY — The future looks grim for the dwindling salmon population spawning in the LaHave River.

In 2009, just 225 salmon were counted by officials at the Morgan Falls fishway, the lowest number ever recorded there and over 1,000 below the conservation estimate required to keep the stock from further decline.

Of particular concern were the very poor returns of grilse, or small salmon, that spend a year feeding in the ocean before returning to their native spawning rivers. Those numbers plummeted from 597 in 2008 to just 168 last year.

"We are hopeful that grilse populations will increase this year, which would add to the overall numbers. If this decline continues, however, the few remaining salmon could be listed as endangered," said Muriel Ferguson of the non-profit Atlantic Salmon Federation (ASF).

Apparently, there's a dark-humoured observation about this decline in conservation circles.

"Faced with the possibility of the wild Atlantic salmon's extinction in many parts of Eastern Canada, the federal government's response doesn't seem to extend much beyond having DFO [the Department of Fisheries and Oceans] scientifically document that extinction as it unfolds," said ASF president Bill Taylor in a recent press release.

He said the federal government has the mandate and responsibility to protect these populations, and there are many dedicated public servants with a passionate desire to do so, but that they're not being given the resources to do the job.

"One fact that is undeniable and troubling is that DFO funding for Atlantic salmon conservation, research, and management programs has been falling, while the threat of extinction has been growing."

According to the ASF, the federal budget allocated \$24 million for wild Atlantic salmon in 1985.

"Today, it is half that. Factoring inflation, this means that the DFO budget for wild Atlantic salmon programs has been effectively reduced by nearly 75 per cent, during a period when the population continued to decline to the lowest levels ever recorded."

A North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization (NASCO) review has deemed Canada is at odds with its obli-

gations to protect the species on three fronts.

"First, on fisheries management, Canada allows a mixed-stock fishery to continue in Labrador with a total lack of research on how it affects wild salmon. On another front, a NASCO review group declared that Canada has failed to adequately address habitat protection and restoration issues," said Mr. Taylor.

"And most recently, signatory nations submitted reports on their countries' progress toward minimizing the dangers associated with aquaculture. Canada failed on criteria to demonstrate or report on actions toward eliminating farmed salmon escapes and transmission of sea lice from farmed salmon to wild salmon."

He said much of the work the federal government is mandated to do on wild Atlantic salmon conservation is now being done by volunteer groups and non-profit conservation organizations, but that they cannot take the place of a properly funded federal department.

In a statement to this newspaper, MP Gerald Keddy said the government is working with non-government organizations, including the ASF, to protect wild populations through initiatives such as a \$30-million endowment fund and its continued funding of biodiversity facilities.

"It is unfair to say that the decline of the Atlantic salmon is solely due to the federal government. There are many factors that have contributed to the decline of the Atlantic salmon, including acid rain, invasive species, disease and parasites and natural predation such as seals," said Mr. Keddy.

"As a salmon fisher myself, I would love to see a restored and vibrant salmon population in our rivers. This would have huge benefits to Atlantic Canadians and our communities. I believe that the provincial governments can have a lead role in a wild Atlantic salmon sport fishing industry as they are the direct beneficiaries of the tourism opportunities and economic spinoffs of this industry."

According to the ASF, the reasons for the decline in wild populations include damage and loss of habitat, the harmful effects of aquaculture and the phenomenon of "at-sea mortality," whereby salmon do not survive the journey to and from their feeding grounds off Greenland and never return to their spawning river.

