Expert says liming needed to restore salmon stocks

By ADAM JACOBS
supertwee@bang-for-real.ca

MAHONE BAY — There is no guarantee there will be any liming done in Lunenburg or Queens any time soon despite ongoing research citing its importance.

It wasn’t too long ago that Lunenburg and Queens had a viable and thriving salmon fishery. The Gold, LaHave and Mersey rivers were once a large part of that.

Things have changed.

The rivers, while still somewhat active, are a shadow of their former selves when it comes to fostering salmon populations.

It has been determined one of the main reasons for the population decrease is high acidity content in the water.

To reduce some of that acid, the Mersey Tobatic Research Institute, on a contract from Environment Canada, has been researching a liming project.

“It should be said this report is going to be a tool,” research institute wildlife biologist Brad Toms said recently. “We’re not going to be liming and Environment Canada isn’t going to be liming.”

On March 8, officials from the institute and the federal government met with local fishermen at the Mahone Bay Legion in an effort to enlist their knowledge and to discuss the project.

Tom Clair, a research scientist with Environment Canada, said the federal department’s priorities are changing and this will likely be the last such study it funds regarding watersheds.

“So this study is more important than ever,” he told the 30 or so people in attendance. “Once the study is completed and the information is in hand, it’s up to you, those of you who have connections with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and with provincial (Department of Natural Resources) to use this information.”

He stressed while Environment Canada has funded the study, it will be up to other departments to implement the liming process.

The study began in 2006.

“It’s the job of the Mersey Tobatic Research Institute to determine exactly where the lime should go,” Mr. Toms said. “The information gathered there will determine which sites have the best potential for future liming.”

Although generally pristine and free of point-source pollution, surface waters in the acidic LaHave, and Gold River watersheds have a low buffering capacity and have collected inputs of acid precipitation from the long-range transport of air pollution.

Although acid-rain amounts have decreased by an estimated 80 per cent since 1980, the soil and watersheds haven’t reorganizations.

“The soils and bedrock is pretty crumbly. You have granite and you have slate. There’s not a whole lot of acid buffering in that.”

Tom Clair
Environment Canada

The idea is to dump lime into the water which, in turn would lessen the acidity and create a more conducive environment for salmon.

If done properly, Mr. Clair said dumping 2,000 kilograms of lime per hectare would have a lasting effect of 25 years on the watershed and surrounding areas.

It’s not an exact science, he admits, but it has been successful in the past, most recently in the West Sheet Harbour area.

Should the waters of the Sheet Shore ever be restored to their prominence regarding the salmon population, it likely won’t be because of natural causes.

“The soils and watersheds in Nova Scotia just won’t recover without help,” he said.