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The ChronicleHerald.ca

Published: 2007-04-28

Battle of Port Mouton Bay: trouble in fish farming

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THERE'S a battle raging over a huge salmon farming project in Port Mouton Bay that raises some hard questions about this province's aquaculture policy.

A New Brunswick company, Aqua Fish Farms, is proposing a 70-acre, or 28-hectare, salmon farm in the bay – to be the largest in Nova Scotia. Big salmon operations are becoming big problems worldwide – they're "floating pig farms," in the words of a University of British Columbia biologist; their wastes "equivalent to sewage," according to a Scottish research paper I saw. The Port Mouton residents fear pollution, the ruination of nearby beaches, and negative impacts on local fishing grounds as well as on tourism and recreation.

The provincial government implies that these are just the usual whiners who want to hog the pretty views. But in the long list of opponents to this project, the significant Tories alone should give the government pause. They include the Queens Progressive Conservative Association, Tory MP Gerald Keddy and Queens Mayor John Leefe, a former provincial Conservative cabinet minister.

Aquaculture is a fine and growing industry in Nova Scotia, where over 300 sites grow a dozen or so different species. Nearly 900 people are employed, mostly owner-operators. Trouble arises when someone wants to more or less hog the whole bay, and the provincial Fisheries Department thinks this is just peachy because it will spur "growth."

The last time it happened was at St. Ann's Bay, Cape Breton, six years ago. There it was mussels. There was already a small, non-problematic operation in the enclosed bay. The residents wanted to know why cages couldn't be added gradually, instead of all at once, and the water monitored to ensure the bay's ecology wasn't damaged. This was too much logic for the Department of Fisheries, and the huge project was forced down local throats, taking up most of the bay's deep water. Opponents are now monitoring it for long-term effects.

"We find that people oppose projects at first, then accept them once they're in," says Marshall Giles, director of aquaculture for the Nova Scotia government, refusing to make any distinctions between small and large projects, and insisting that big isn't a problem. Rather, "the trouble quite often appears to be public acceptance." He's unimpressed by the Port Mouton arguments, saying that Aqua Farms already has a small operation some 300 yards from the nearest beach, which is Carter's Beach, and that the new operation will be even farther away. And "the existing site is trouble free."

Such talk infuriates Blair Davis, head of the Port Mouton group, whose website (www.friendsofportmoutonbay.ca) shows pictures of algae rolling up on the beach, the typical byproduct of such operations. Davis points out that the province's own recent test results show the site to be among the most toxic in Nova Scotia. He says Aqua Farms had been told to clean up several years ago, as per federal guidelines. "Aqua's response was to apply for an expansion so they could move off the present site."

Worldwide, aquaculture was supposed to replace the declining wild fishery. But some farmed fish are making it worse, notably salmon, which require from two to 10 pounds of feed fish to make one pound of salmon, leading to high pollution and even greater depletion of wild species.

According to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), both the feed-per-pound and the amount of waste materials are declining, thanks to new techniques. This is true, says marine biologist Inka Milewski of the New Brunswick Conservation Council, who's advising the Port Mouton group, but these advances are being cancelled by greater concentration of fish in cages. She adds that the regulation of fish farms, federally and provincially, is way behind the science. Scientists recommend 300 to 1,300 units of measurement for sulphide levels. DFO managers have arbitrarily stuck to 6,000. The latest measurement at the existing Port Mouton site was 7,000.

Given the fact that these large fish farms provide few jobs – only five or six for a mega-farm, – what's the attraction? The aim, says Giles, is to have more jobs in processing, like New Brunswick. This, alas, is one of the places where pollution is a big issue, despite the flushing capacity of the Bay of Fundy, which is much higher than in Port Mouton.

Then there's the problem that sticks in the craw of critics: that, in aquaculture, government is both promoter and regulator. This doesn't bother Giles. "Governments do this all the time," he says. The problem is that the promotion part vastly overwhelms the regulation, to the point where officials like Giles are virtually propagandists for the cause, always belittling anyone who objects, and geared to roar ahead no matter what.

As I said, aquaculture is a fine industry. What could ruin it is shoving big, dirty projects down people's throats.

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