

New system working: fish growers

Aquaculture For the first time in a decade, there are no cases of deadly disease

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ST. STEPHEN - There are fewer fish in the farms this year but salmon growers say the aquaculture salmon in Charlotte County is healthier than ever before.

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Jamey Smith, executive director of the New Brunswick Salmon Growers Association, says this is the first year in a decade that there have been no cases of Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA). Smith said the results are proof that the industry's new three-bay system is working the way it should.

"ISA in the past has been a real significant cause of mortality and lower production on-site," said Smith. "We have a situation where there are no positive cases and that would suggest that the farms will do better overall."

Smith said ISA had negatively affected the industry because when two fish at a farm had tested positive for the disease all of the fish in the farm had to be taken out of the water and sold before they had reached full growth.

With no fish infected, Smith said farmers will get more money for the salmon because they will have the opportunity to mature properly.

The new approach to aquaculture in the province divides the farms according to the age of the fish, with one area housing young salmon and a second housing market-ready stock, while also leaving some sites fallow or empty.

While the system is taking a toll on the industry right now, Smith said it will produce long-term sustainability in the industry.

The New Brunswick salmon farming industry, the province's largest agri-food sector, has a production valued at \$225 million and the industry employs about 4,500 people. More than 75 per cent of the fish grown in the province are sent to export markets.

Nell Halse, spokeswoman for Cooke Aquaculture, said even though about half of the fish farms in Charlotte County are empty this year as part of the new system, the company is still producing about the same amount of salmon.

"We have left a huge number of sites empty this year to move to this three-stage system," said Halse. "We have moved some of our production to Newfoundland, Maine and Nova Scotia. Now that we have made the change we will be able to move ahead and we have seen positive outcomes"

Halse said even though Cooke is producing about the same amount of fish in Maine and Newfoundland as it is in New Brunswick, New Brunswick is still its aquaculture hub.

"New Brunswick is where it began," said Halse.

"It is the New Brunswick companies that have invested elsewhere. New Brunswick is taking its expertise and investing in other areas."

Halse said areas where the salmon farms are fallow this year, such as Grand Manan, are not seeing a major loss of jobs because people are being moved around in the company instead of let go.

She said next year there will be fewer of the cages left fallow and eventually production will go back up to where it was in New Brunswick.

Rick Doucet, MLA for Charlotte-the Isles, said even though numbers might be down, he sees this year as a milestone for the aquaculture business.

"I know there are challenges like weather, challenges of disease and market fluctuations and they have certainly done quite well. I think collectively the industry have hit these challenges head on," said Doucet.

"I think it was what I can see it was short-term pain for long-term gain."