

DFO Letter Informing Alexandra Morton, Chief Bob Chamberlain and John Dawson of the Department's Decision on Their Application to Capture Juvenile Salmon From the Ahta River Estuary, Transport Them, and Release Them Away From the Capture Site

I am writing in response to your application to Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) to capture an unknown quantity of pink and chum salmon from the Ahta River estuary and release the fish into fish habitat away from the capture site.

In doing so, I would also like to take this opportunity to support Chief Bob Chamberlain's desire to develop a more comprehensive and strategic approach to management and restoration of salmon returns in the area, which was noted in a recent e-mail. DFO is willing to commit time and resources to work within a partnership to ensure this comprehensive plan is developed. I view it as an opportunity to work together on our common goals of protecting and rebuilding the wild salmon stocks in the Broughton Archipelago.

DFO agrees that some actions should be taken as soon as possible. In this regard, I commit that DFO will be available in the coming weeks to work with local partners and the province of B.C. to take appropriate actions in the coming year. Our actions will include developing a plan to address the longer term objective of making the Kakweikan spawning channel more naturally sustainable and productive, and a feasibility study of measures we can undertake to address the mass wasting event in the Ahta River. DFO staff have already made two trips into the Kakweikan this spring to assess the channel and we would welcome your participation during our next assessment to discuss options for its restoration.

However, while I know that you are concerned about the possible impacts of sea lice on salmon populations, and that you have worked hard to protect wild salmon populations,

I must advise you that the Department does not support your proposal to capture and transport Ahta River juveniles past the fish farms in the area. Given DFO's scientific research and the regulatory processes that are in place, the Department believes that the capture, transport and release of these fish has the potential to do more harm than good.

As is the case with all such applications, your application was reviewed by the Federal-Provincial Introductions and Transfers Committee (ITC) and a recommendation provided by the ITC to DFO for consideration. Pursuant to sections 55 / 56 of the *Fishery (General) Regulations* under the *Fisheries Act*, applications to release fish into fish

habitat are assessed on the basis of genetic, ecological and disease concerns, and to determine whether the proposed activity is in keeping with the good management of the fishery.

Having considered the recommendations of the ITC, I must advise you that DFO will not be issuing the licences required to capture and release pink and chum salmon from the Ahta River estuary. The ITC has recommended that your application be rejected on the grounds that it does not meet the test of good management of the fishery. The Ahta population is already vulnerable due to the effect of a November landslide and there are concerns that the capture and transfer of juvenile fish may result in a reduction in the population due to both direct and indirect impacts on survival. These include potential mortality of the fish as a result of stress during seining, stress and holding conditions during transport, and releasing the fish into an unknown environment 30–35 km distant from the capture site. Imprinting and subsequent homing for any returning adults may also be affected. Our experience has shown that, in some cases, capture and release strategies similar to the one proposed in your application, have resulted in significant decreases in returns. These strategies have been carried out with larger fish and without the added stress of wild capture.

In addition, salmon farms in B.C., including the farms located near the Ahta River, operate under provincial regulations. They are required to have approved Fish Health Management Plans, conduct regular testing for sea lice, and undertake mandatory treatments or harvests if levels reach three motile lice per fish during periods of salmon migration. The fish farm operators in this area have informed us that they have chosen to proactively treat their farm stock prior to reaching the trigger level to further reduce the numbers of lice.

As I said at the outset, I believe that some actions should be taken as soon as possible. I applaud the sentiment expressed in the e-mail of putting the debate on the causes aside and working together to benefit wild salmon, and I welcome your efforts to find ways to harmonize with our provincial colleagues on the shared goals of strong river systems filled with wild salmon.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Sprout
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Pacific Region