

# Miramichi fly fishermen fight Ottawa's new salmon rules

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Jerry Doak, owner of W.W. Doak in Doaktown, wants the federal government to allow anglers to keep their catch.

Photo: James West Photography

A backlash is mounting against Ottawa's decision to stop anglers in New Brunswick from catching and killing wild Atlantic salmon.

A group of Miramichi fly fishermen wants a return to the old fishing rules, arguing that last season's stiff conservation measures actually hurt the fish they were meant to protect.

They've created a new website and 5,000 brochures that list 28 reasons to oppose the mandatory release of grilse on the Miramichi River system, blaming what it calls misunderstanding and the conservation industry for the new rule.

“What’s happened in recent years is there’s a sort of environmental narcissism that’s crept in,” said Jerry Doak, the owner of W.W. Doak Fly Fishing shop in Doaktown, who helped put the information together. “People look at it and say, ‘well, I scheduled a play date with the Miramichi. I went for three days and the Miramichi didn’t entertain me the way I thought it should. So I think we have a biological crisis on our hands.’”

He said local people who are most put off by the new rule don’t think that way.

“They know that there are rhythms of nature and you know you go fishing when there’s a likelihood that you’ll catch fish, and you won’t get a fish every time you go to the river. Non-residents and those who perhaps have enough money to have everything happen the way they think it should happen don’t approach the river that way.”

The fight pits the local angling community against conservation groups such as the Miramichi Salmon Association and the Atlantic Salmon Federation which have been calling for stricter measures for years. The groups themselves have members from New Brunswick but they also include wealthy anglers from the United States and other places.

At issue is whether young salmon, or grilse, should be preserved at all costs. These are the salmon that up until last year, anglers were allowed to keep, in limited quantities.

Doak and his friends, who he says include biologists who are not affiliated with Ottawa or the conservation groups, argue the fish that spend only one winter at sea are mostly male and play a minimal role in fertilizing salmon eggs. They say it’s only the bigger, multi-sea winter fish or big spawners that travel all the way to Greenland and back that truly matter when it comes to species preservation. And no one has called for a return to that fishery in New Brunswick, which only aboriginal fishermen have participated in for the last few decades.

Mark Hambrook, the president of the Miramichi Salmon Association, says Doak and his supporters are wrong about grilse. He believes they should be allowed to fertilize eggs because it promotes genetic diversity in the fish stocks.

“We need to address the fundamental issues to get more fish back, and then people can have more fish,” he said. “If no people were fishing at all that would be a tragedy. But we still have catch and release.”

The conservationists says no fish should be killed on the rivers until Ottawa enforces the waters better and more scientific studies are done. A special committee headed by the federation’s president, Bill Taylor, made more than 60 recommendations to the federal government last year on helping salmon, but so far the only measure it has put in place is catch and release.

Doak bemoans the policy which has discouraged local anglers from fishing. Locals don’t enjoy putting a line in the water unless they can put a salmon on the table, he says, and the proof is that fewer than half the number of licences were bought last year, deeply hurting a proud New Brunswick tradition.

He describes this as a grave danger for the province’s iconic fighting fish because there are not as many anglers on the water watching for poachers who take the big, spawning salmon.

Doak also questions whether the government’s estimates have been accurate. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans uses trap nets to catch a percentage of fish and then estimates a total number. In 2014, it estimated about 18,000 salmon returned to the Miramichi, well below the 44,000 big salmon and grilse that biologists say are required to ensure long-term survival of the species.

“Hurricane Arthur wiped out those trap nets for a week in 2014, and half the salmon returned to the river after Sept. 13, when the counts were over,” Doak said. “No one is saying 2014 was a good year for salmon because it wasn’t. It was terrible for fishing. But the counts are underestimating the number of grilse in the river.”

This past season’s estimates are not in yet. Ottawa originally planned to have the figures available last month, but now it says it needs to the end of February.

Hambrook says based on what he’s heard, the numbers are better than 2014, but still not stellar.

There is one area where the two sides agree: both say each river should be managed individually, with different conservation measures depending on the need, similar to the practice in Quebec.

“We’d like to have the government set targets for each river, not to have the same blanket policy that we had in New Brunswick in the past, where you bought your salmon tags and you could use them anywhere to catch and keep salmon,” Hambrook said. “You could use all your tags on one tiny section of river that was under stress. It wasn’t river by river management.”

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