

Salmon options for 2016 season still being weighed: Miramichi-Grand Lake MP

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A worker with the Miramichi Salmon Association surveying for Atlantic salmon on the Miramichi River.
Photo: Miramichi Leader archives

With the start of the spring run of wild Atlantic salmon just weeks away, there are some signs that the federal government might consider loosening the unprecedented blanket restrictions imposed on the recreational fishery last year.

Although Fisheries and Oceans Canada has yet to reveal its plans for the 2016 salmon fishing season in the Gulf Region, which includes the Miramichi River watershed, the Liberal MP for Miramichi-Grand Lake says that department officials are still weighing their options.

Pat Finnigan, who serves on the government standing committees for fisheries and agriculture, said that based on the talks he's been privy to, he would be surprised if the wall-to-wall catch-and-release regulations introduced last summer in response to record low fish counts ended up back in place this season.

Finnigan said he had an opportunity to question Fisheries and Oceans staffers about the salmon file during committee meetings a couple of weeks back. He said the answers he received at that time point to the department taking a more targeted approach to any limitations on the fishery this season.

"I know this is a very important issue on the river and the approach they had before was sort of a one-size-fits-all but I think they are going to approach this a little more of an area management, and I'm hoping that's going to go through," Finnigan said in an interview.

"It's going to be DFO's decision but I'm keeping in touch with the local people and also what's happening with DFO, so I'm hoping we can come up with a solution that's good for the salmon but also good for the industry."

The situation has been a divisive one, particularly in those Miramichi River communities that rely heavily on the economic activity salmon fishing has provided for generations.

In the Miramichi region alone, the salmon fishery is worth around \$20 million and supports hundreds of jobs.

There is also a strong cultural connection to the river in this part of the province, where anglers from all over the world have long travelled. When they're here, they rent cabins, hire guides, buy supplies and frequent local businesses.

Groups like the Atlantic Wildlife Federation, outfitters and politicians, including Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin MLA Jake Stewart, have spoken out against the decision by the federal government to suspend the use of tags last season. They are also encouraging the department to loosen those restrictions heading into the upcoming season.

The catch-and-release rules seemed to result in less activity on the water despite reports of good fishing last summer. Last year, the number of salmon licences sold by the province dropped by nearly half, to 12,535 from more than 20,000 in 2014.

"I think the fishermen are disgusted for the most part because they feel they have been the target of conservation groups - the anglers buy licences, waders, rods, lines, flies, and now all of the tackle stores around here are going to have to do something with years of inventory for barbed hooks," Stewart said in a previous interview.

"Anglers in particular don't feel like they have a voice - you can't deprive people of all the basic things they've survived on, because at some point, these people are going to have their say on this."

Organizations including the Atlantic Salmon Federation and other conservationists say they would prefer the government to take a more cautious route and determine the root cause of the species' sharp decline before allowing anglers to keep a grilse.

Last year was the first time in history that fishermen on the Miramichi River and its tributaries were barred from keeping a salmon.

Those measures were established in response to record-low counts from the summer of 2014, during which only 12,000 fish were recorded.

There was more optimism last summer, however, as monitoring stations recorded higher salmon counts than they had seen in the last three years. Those numbers were more in line with the middle-to-higher end returns counted over the last 16 years.

A special advisory committee struck by former Conservative fisheries minister Gail Shea came back with a series of recommendations last summer as part of the development of an action plan for the salmon fishery in eastern Canada.

Aside from requesting the government increase funding for research, habitat renewal and studies into predation, they also suggested that the salmon retention limit for a given river system be determined on a case-by-case basis.

“Obviously, the committee put its report out last year and I asked specifically if they were going to follow all of the recommendations in there,” Finnigan said. “They said they would be using as a guide for them to follow.”

Fisheries and Oceans, meanwhile, is in the process of gathering feedback from the public after launching an online survey the department says will help shape a management strategy for the 2016 season.

A statement put out by the Miramichi Salmon Association last week, meanwhile, cemented that organization’s call to keep the catch-and-release measures in place for another season.

“In order to preserve the Atlantic salmon for the future, we believe the catch and release angling only policy satisfies that requirement and possibly will be continued on Miramichi waters in 2016, however the lodges and clubs are open and excitedly awaiting anglers for the 2016 season,” the statement reads. “We hope 2016 brings lots of fish and fishermen to the beautiful Miramichi River.”

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