DFO halts planned salmon release, putting future of massive project in doubt

KRIS MCDAVID | Miramichi Leader

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These are some of the Atlantic salmon being raised at the South Esk fish hatchery as part of a major restoration initiative. However, Fisheries and Oceans Canada officials with have informed the Collaboration for Atlantic Salmon Tomorrow that a planned fall fish release cannot go ahead. Photo: Miramichi Salmon Association

Members of a massive partnership working to preserve the Miramichi River system's legendary run of wild Atlantic salmon were looking forward to releasing hundreds of fish back into the ecosystem earlier this fall as part of a cutting-edge research project designed to play a part in helping stabilize a species in decline.

That's until Fisheries and Oceans Canada officials informed representatives of the Collaboration for Atlantic Salmon Tomorrow on Sept. 25 that it would not be happening.

Andrew Willett, the salmon group's executive director, confirmed Thursday the department earlier this fall told the coalition, backed by the provincial science community, private industry, environmental organizations, government and institutions such as the University of New Brunswick, the group had not been granted a permit for its long-planned release of adult salmon back into their home river.

That decision, Willett said, caught the organization completely off guard.

Under the best-case scenario, he said, the decision will result in substantial delays to the first phase of a project in the making for the past two years.

Willett said the move could also potentially throw the future of the initiative into doubt. Millions of federal and private-sector dollars have already been spent on it.

"It's a very serious setback. It's very serious and it's certainly very disappointing," Willett said. "It's now too late. The fish in the hatchery in South Esk are overripe, they're over-mature and their eggs would no longer be suitable, so we're currently considering our options."

CAST's salmon release initiative, formally known as the Smolt to Adult Supplementation, was orchestrated as a new conservation method aimed at better preparing Miramichi's salmon population for the many dangers they face on their journey to sea.

In May 2015, researchers began collecting three-year-old salmon smolts from the Northwest and Little Southwest branches of the Miramichi before transporting them to the nearby Miramichi Salmon Association fish hatchery in South Esk to be raised in tanks.

Once mature and, most importantly, having been sheltered from any risk of at-sea mortality posed by predators, poachers and commercial fishing, the plan called for those now-adult salmon to be reintroduced back into the ecosystem to spawn.

In a statement provided to the Miramichi Leader on Thursday, Fisheries and Oceans spokeswoman Krista Petersen clarified the department's reasoning for the decision.

Petersen said the absence of a thorough peer review of the CAST plan, along with a lack of consultation with First Nations, all factored in.

"DFO has clearly communicated from the beginning of this program in 2015 that under no condition would the large-scale release of SAS fish be permitted without a science peer review of the experimental plan and formal engagement with affected indigenous groups," Petersen said.

"Given the cultural significance of Atlantic salmon to Indigenous people in New Brunswick, it is critical to have their meaningful participation and consent prior to embarking on the larger-scale experimental studies involving hatchery-raised adult salmon supplementation in the Miramichi system."

CAST officials say they're confused by that rationale, stressing the organization believes it has done everything that's been asked of it and more.

Willett said that CAST has worked extremely closely with First Nations communities, engaging in over a dozen meetings since 2015 while featuring Indigenous representation on its science advisory committee and out in the field.

He said CAST has, in addition, submitted five updates of its proposal to Fisheries and Oceans' Gulf region office. Willett said officials there have responded favourably to the initiative.

Willett said that CAST has always agreed to take part in a peer review and expressed as much in writing to the federal department "several times."

The organization was expecting one to take place sometime this fall, until it was notified of the department's decision in September, he said.

All CAST is seeking at this point from Fisheries and Oceans, Willett said, is some clarity on how to proceed so that the group isn't wasting "time, talent and money."

Willett said the group wants to hear from the department within 30 days.

He said the entire initiative, which also includes three other projects already underway, is at a crossroads because of this.

"There is no amount of passion, science and funding that can save wild Atlantic salmon as long DFO continues to demonstrate a lack of leadership with repeated waffling based on personal opinion, not science, and a similar lack of accountability on its commitments to the science," a strongly worded joint statement from CAST released Thursday evening states.

Miramichi Salmon Association president Mark Hambrook, whose responsibility it has been been to raise those salmon at the hatchery, said he was disappointed with the decision, adding that came at "not the 11th hour, but the 13th hour."

Hambrook said CAST was counting on being able to move ahead with this year's reintroduction as a slow build toward larger repopulation efforts in future years. This year's launch would have also allowed the group to gather some vital scientific data in the meantime.

The plans, he said, would have seen around 2,300 fish reintroduced next year, followed by an additional 5,000 in 2019.

This year's launch would have also allowed the group to gather some vital scientific data in the meantime, Hambrook said.

"What we're trying to explore is a new technique that could be used in case of an emergency on the Miramichi or in other rivers. As for what happens now, good question. We did get permission to release a smaller number of fish. … Just yesterday we got that permit, but it only [covers] 20 pairs of our fish, so 40 in total."

That secondary permit only covers a special study area University of New Brunswick postgraduate students are overseeing as part of a separate project.

Hambrook said he's noticing an "extra level of caution" coming from the federal level, which he said is fine in certain circumstances, but with regard to this program, perhaps a bit overkill.

He said that given the amount of research and good science that has gone into developing this project, he's confident it would pass several stress tests concerning potential negative impacts on the fish and the wider ecosystem.

"We have some of the best scientists available that have worked hard on this plan," he said.

"Our plan has tried to address every concern that can be brought out. We have a vast genetics program. There's a PhD candidate working on this, and for every fish that goes out, we have a genotype so that if they lay an egg in the river, we can tell who the parents are … so this is a very detailed program."

Willett, meanwhile, said it's interesting that earlier this month, the government had no issue with the release of a large number of salmon into the Upper Salmon River at Fundy National Park via helicopter as part of a similar project that shares many of the same principles as the CAST venture.

"The difference in the Miramichi is … we want to act with a similar project before it's too late, before the salmon go extinct," he said.

Willett said everybody involved with CAST is committed to the fight to save Atlantic salmon, but it can't get there without the help of Fisheries and Oceans Canada and First Nations.