

Infectious salmon anemia: Getting the jump on a disease of 'devastating quickness'

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West Coast senators, promoted by discovery of a virus in British Columbia salmon, are telling federal fisheries agencies: Get moving on Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA) before it moves on us.

"In the past, it has moved through salmon populations with devastating quickness . . . The mistakes made in Norway and Chile were not to respond quickly enough," Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Seattle, said in Seattle on Sunday after meeting with federal, state and tribal fisheries officials.

"What is particularly important is that the U.S. has its own scientific evidence so we can have our own response plan," Cantwell added. "To have our own response plan, we need to have our own scientific evaluation."

Salmon are not only an iconic presence in the Northwest, but remain a big deal economically -- despite decimation of runs by dam construction, overfishing and shoddy logging practices.

A recent study of Pacific salmon estimated the wholesale value of the annual sport and commercial catch comes to at least \$2.2 billion, and supports 35,000 jobs in harvesting and processing.

Infectious salmon anemia poses no danger to human health. Once salmon populations are infected, however, the disease quickly reaches a "tipping point" where it can't be stopped. A total of 9.6 million farmed salmon had to be destroyed in New Brunswick to halt one outbreak.

The deadly virus was initially found in two sockeye smolts taken about 400 miles up the British Columbia coast from Vancouver. Subsequently, the ISA virus was found in the fins of three adult salmon -- a Chinook, a chum and a coho -- taken out of the Harrison River in the Fraser Valley early last month.

"This is the first time this virus has been detected in the Northwest," Dr. James Winton, chief of the fish health section of the Western Fisheries Research Center said in Seattle on Sunday.

The sockeye smolts were sent by Simon Fraser University to be tested at the Atlantic Veterinary College in Prince Edward Island, which has subsequently tested the Harrison River salmon.

But additional testing on the sockeye smolts, done at the University of Bergen in Norway, was not able to confirm the findings.

"The test material we received was of poor quality and all tests were negative except the one which was weakly positive," reported Dr. Arne Nylund, who conducted the tests.

Dr. Winton echoed Nylund's opinion. "These samples were not in high quality and they were collected for another purpose," Winton said.

Discovery of the virus has set off a furious debate in British Columbia: The provincial and Canadian governments have encouraged and supported salmon farming: Atlantic salmon are being farmed in pens near fjords and river systems (e.g. Knight Inlet, Kingcome Inlet) that support major runs of wild Pacific Salmon.

Salmon migrating south out of the Gulf of Alaska through Johnstone Strait pass millions of salmon being raised in pens in the Broughton Archipelago off the B.C. Mainland, and near Campbell River on Vancouver Island.

In a tough letter last week, the bipartisan Senate trio -- Cantwell and Sens. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) and Mark Begich (D-Alaska) indicated the Canadian government could not be trusted. Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans has been a major promoter of salmon farming. The senators wrote:

"We urge the U.S. government to obtain samples from the two infected sockeye and run independent diagnostic tests to confirm the presence of the ISA virus in British Columbia. We should not rely on another government -- particularly one that may have a motive to misrepresent its findings -- to determine how we assess the risk ISA may pose to American fishery jobs."

Dr. Winton was being diplomatic on Sunday, saying: "We will work with our Canadian partners but also have to have our own information."

The feds are responding. Agencies will have drawn up a preliminary analysis plan by next week, said Mark Strom, a microbiology expert with the fisheries lab of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

NOAA plans to screen salmon in American waters for ISA, he added. "We can respond immediately if a virulent strain of ISA is found," Strom said.

Fearing the finger of blame, salmon farming spokesmen in British Columbia are discounting the chances of an ISA outbreak, pointing to Dr. Nylund's finding.

Odd Grydeland, former president of the B.C. Salmon Farmers Association said "extreme environmentalists" are promoting the virus story. He noted in an essay that the sockeye smolt samples came from a university "which has given an honorary doctorate to the most rabid anti-salmon farming critic in British Columbia, 'Dr.' Alexandra Morton."

Morton was one of the salmon activists who gathered the Harrison River samples. She is a marine biologist who lives near the Broughton Archipelago, and has linked release of sea lice from salmon pens to the decimation of wild pink salmon populations in the area.

"Nobody in B.C. are saying with certainty that the ISA virus is not here, but there is a growing level of suspicion that positive that positive sampling results announced by environmentalist are suspect at best," Grydeland argued.

Salmon advocates, south of the border, have complained of a similar pooh-poohing in the upper reaches of NOAA.

A Senate-passed amendment says ISA must be taken seriously. It was sponsored by Cantwell and other West Coast senators.

The amendment requires a report be delivered to Congress within six months which outlines surveillance, susceptibility of species and populations, gaps in knowledge, and recommendations for action.

Read more: <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/connelly/article/Infectious-Salmon-Anemia-Getting-the-jump-on-a-2255528.php#ixzz1loD6dve4>

Murkowski Wants Answers on Reports of Earlier Salmon Virus

"Weeks ago, I was troubled to hear of the possibility of infectious salmon anemia in nearby fisheries. But now I am absolutely alarmed that this was not the first our neighbors to the east had heard of this, and had sat on critical information for ten years – putting us ten years behind in addressing this situation."

Cantwell, Murkowski, Begich Call for Investigation of Salmon Virus Threat

U.S. Senators Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Mark Begich (D-AK) introduced a bipartisan amendment that calls for an investigation of the spread of the Canadian salmon virus that poses a threat to Pacific Northwest wild salmon and the coastal economies that rely on them.

"We need the best information on this troubling issue, and we need it as soon as possible," said Senator Murkowski. "We also must educate consumers, when it comes to letting them know that wild salmon is still safe and one of Alaska's most delicious natural resources – but we also must assure the quality of the nation's fisheries, as well as the job security of the thousands of Alaskans who work in them."

Murkowski and Begich to FDA: Do Not Approve GE Fish

"GE salmon could cause dramatic market impacts for wild salmon and this issue must at least be acknowledged, but FDA is completely ignoring it. I am prepared to do everything possible to prohibit funding for FDA approval of GE salmon in the Senate appropriations process," added Murkowski.

Alaska Senators Seek GE Salmon Ban in Budget

"The FDA has not taken into account the full economic impacts that the approval of engineered fish will have - especially for a state with robust fisheries like Alaska," said Murkowski, who chairs the Oceans Caucus and serves on the Appropriations Committee.

In addition to environmental and public health concerns, Begich and Murkowski say they fear the global fish market could be damaged by the introduction of GE fish.

"Salmon markets and prices were severely impacted with the growth of widespread salmon farming in the 1990s and Alaska fishermen struggled to recover by branding their salmon as wild," she said in a release Monday. "Large scale production of GE salmon poses a new threat by creating product confusion among buyers and possible rejection in the marketplace, particularly if the fish are not labeled."

Senators Cantwell, Murkowski and Begich: U.S. Should Test Salmon Virus, Not Rely on Canada

"The threat of a potentially devastating infectious salmon virus needs an immediate federal response," the Senators continued. "We are writing to urge you to marshal the resources we need to prioritize Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA) research, surveillance, outreach, and mitigation measures across the Pacific Northwest and develop a response plan. At risk are healthy salmon populations which are the foundation for tens of thousands of jobs and billions of dollars of economic activity throughout the West Coast."

"We sincerely hope that the recent detection of ISA in Pacific salmon turns out to be a false alarm," the Senators continued in the letter. "However, waiting for even more red flags to appear would be irresponsible. We know that ISA has catastrophically impacted salmon industries around the world, costing tens of thousands of jobs abroad, and that the virus is virtually impossible to eradicate once it has spread within an area. We urge you to act now to prevent a similar catastrophic outbreak in the salmon populations of the Pacific Northwest."