

Grand Manan waters could help save Bay of Fundy salmon

DERWIN GOWAN Telegraph-Journal

June 21, 2016

Share this article

Facebook

Twitter

Email



Left to right, Chief Rebecca Knockwood and biologist Wendy Epworth, manager Tim Robinson and technician Laura Buck from Fort Folly First Nation's fishery recover program attended an announcement in Saint Andrews on Tuesday on a new program to restore salmon to the Petitcodiac RiVer.

Photo: Derwin Gowan/Telegraph-Journal

SAINT ANDREWS • The waters of Dark Harbour, Grand Manan, could play a role in restoring salmon to inner Bay of Fundy rivers, two cabinet ministers announced on Tuesday.

Canada's Fisheries and Oceans Minister Dominic LeBlanc and New Brunswick's Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries Minister Rick Doucet told a room full of people at the Huntsman Marine Science Centre in Saint Andrews that a former commercial fish farming site off Grand Manan has been designated the province's first wild salmon conservation marine site.

Chief Rebecca Knockwood of Fort Folly First Nation acted as MC for the event. This Mi'kmaq community near Dorchester will capture smolt on their way down the Petitcodiac River to feed and grow at sea, and take them to Dark Harbour where staff from Cooke Aquaculture will feed and tend them until they reach adult stage, ready to spawn.

They hope that the progeny of these fish born in the wild will go to sea and return to spawn without ever knowing captivity, increasing their chances for survival.

Parks Canada staff uses the same technique of raising smolt at Dark Harbour to restore salmon in rivers in Fundy National Park.

LeBlanc and Doucet were in Saint Andrews for a meeting of federal and provincial fisheries ministers.

Fort Folly First Nation will use the same approach in the Peticodiac River as Parks Canada has been using since 2014 for rivers in Fundy National Park, Fort Folly's project manager Tim Robinson explained in an interview following the official ceremonies.

The nine people working in the Fort Folly program trap smolt, young salmon headed to sea to feed, grow and return to spawn as adults. They take these salmon first to the Huntsman centre in Saint Andrews to check for disease, then to Dark Harbour where Cooke Aquaculture staff feed them in large sea pens.

They will keep them at Dark Harbour until they are ready to reproduce, then return them to the Petitcodiac, bypassing the chance of prey making a meal of them before laying eggs in their native rivers.

Robinson and Corey Clarke, manager of the similar program for rivers in Fundy National Park, said research shows that salmon stand a better chance of surviving and returning from sea to spawn if they have no experience of captivity.

They hope that the tiny salmon from the eggs laid and fertilized by the fish returned from Dark Harbour go to sea and return, never knowing the inside of a hatchery, tank or sea pen.

"We started a project like this in late 2000s – 2009," Clarke said in an interview. Fish returned to the Upper Salmon and Point Wolfe rivers in numbers not seen in years, he said.

Parks Canada began using the Dark Harbour site in 2014. Cooke Aquaculture provides the dedicated crew to look after these fish exclusively without farmed salmon destined for the dinner plate in the same water, he explained.

Fort Folly brought smolt from the Petitcodiac to Dark Harbour for the first time last year. They will

be released into the Petitodiac watershed, including the main river and likely the Pollet this fall.

LeBlanc and Doucet said that salmon dwindled in the inner Bay of Fundy from 40,000 half a century ago to 250 by 2000. They are now listed as endangered under the Species at Risk Act.

The live gene bank program at the Mactaquac hatchery has saved them from extirpation but they do not do as well in fresh water tanks as they would in the sea, Robinson and Clarke said. At Dark Harbour, they will grow in something closer to natural conditions, and their offspring should never know captivity.

The Petitodiac River system once provided 20 per cent of the inner Bay of Fundy salmon run, with 5,000 to 8,000 fish returning each year, Robinson said.

He did not have numbers ready at hand on the Petitcodiac salmon run today but said that these fish still depend on human intervention.

Clarke said that conservationists saved the last remaining genetic stock of inner Bay of Fundy salmon from rivers in Fundy National Park in the early years of this century. "This is a wild stock of fish that cannot survive in current conditions," he said.

Conservationists cannot point a finger at the Greenland fishery for the state of salmon in these rivers. Robinson and Clarke said that salmon from the inner Bay of Fundy hardly leave the Gulf of Maine when they go to sea, unlike their cousins from the outer bay and elsewhere that travel to the north Atlantic Ocean.

Knockwood and the two ministers spoke about the historical and cultural significance of Atlantic salmon. Doucet said that recreational salmon angling spurs total spending of \$54.7 million a year in New Brunswick, and that this fishery contributes \$16 million in gross domestic product and the equivalent of 637 jobs on the Miramichi River alone.

He and LeBlanc said that saving the inner Bay of Fundy salmon demands collaboration.

Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association executive director Sue Farquharson and Huntsman Marine Science Centre executive-director Jamey Smith also spoke at this event.

Share this article

Facebook

Twitter

Email