

Appendix G: 2017 Atlantic Salmon Escapement Event Summary

On August 19-20th, 2017 one of the three net pens containing Atlantic Salmon in Deepwater Bay, off the coast of Cypress Island WA, failed. Initial reports from Cooke Aquaculture, owner and operator of the net pen, stated that the pen contained 3.1 million pounds of fish and 160,000 individuals ultimately escaped into the Salish Sea. By January 2018, the Seattle Times reported that Cooke Aquaculture had misled agencies and closer to 263,000 fish were released with 206,000 remaining unaccounted for after an extensive catch effort.

Cooke Aquaculture applied for permits in February 2017 to replace the pen once the 2017 harvest was to be completed, describing the pen as “used and nearing the end of its serviceable life.” The pen experienced a major failure in July 2017 when it came loose from its mooring lines and drifted in the current. The corporation made repairs to the structure. Between July and the August failure, biomass increased in the pen while the salmon grew to their full adult size, intensifying stress on the structure. While many agencies are involved in permitting net pens, the US Coast Guard is only responsible for inspecting operations with hazardous materials, and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) conducts inspections only for fish health. The Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) inspects such facilities but makes no assessment of structural integrity during routine inspections.

Following the August 19th net pen collapse, escaped Atlantic Salmon were recovered in marine areas as far north as Esperanza Inlet on Vancouver Island, BC, and as far south as Hammersley Inlet, near Shelton. Recreational and tribal fishermen were encouraged to catch as many Atlantic Salmon as possible, regardless of sex or size, within areas open for Pacific Salmon fishing. Escaped salmon were also found in freshwater systems, including the Puyallup, Snohomish, Skagit, and Nooksack rivers. Upper Skagit tribal fishermen continued to catch Atlantic Salmon 42-miles upstream in the Skagit River at least through December.

There is no evidence that the escaped salmon were successfully feeding. Only some wood chips and pieces of shell were found in guts of fish sampled, though most were empty. There is no record of Atlantic Salmon successfully breeding in Washington State, despite multiple attempts by the state to introduce them as a new sport fishery during the 20th century. There is also no evidence that Atlantic Salmon are capable of cross-breeding with Pacific Salmon species. Spread of disease is a lingering concern regarding this release, and though Cooke Aquaculture claimed no infection in its Atlantic Salmon, Piscine orthoreovirus (PRV) was found in tissue samples from recaptured fish. Wild Fish Conservancy, a local non-profit, released the results of their PRV-positive lab tests to fuel the anti-nonnative net pen movement, prompting WDFW to respond with a white-paper reporting that PRV is common in any farmed Atlantic Salmon and no evidence suggests that it poses significant harm to wild Pacific Salmon.

After the release, Washington State halted permit review for any new net pen proposals. DNR issued a default notice to Cooke Aquaculture for their Atlantic Salmon net pens in Rich Passage and terminated the lease for their Atlantic Salmon net pen sites at Port Angeles and Cypress Island. Deficiencies have also been found at Cooke's Hope Island facilities. Cooke Aquaculture is suing DNR for the lease termination but faces a lawsuit from the Wild Fish Conservancy for negligence under the Clean Water Act for the Atlantic Salmon release. The Lummi Tribe accepted compensation for damages from Cooke Aquaculture, but did not accept an offer of more money in exchange for the tribe's silence in the debate over the future of the industry. Chairmen from 21 tribes signed a letter, which was sent to every legislator in WA, in favor of banning non-native net pens in Puget Sound. In March 2018 Governor Jay Inslee signed a bill into law which stipulates that no new or renewed Atlantic Salmon net pen leases will be permitted in Washington State, effectively banning any Atlantic Salmon net pens after 2022.

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