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North Coast declared off-limits for fish farms But licences announced for South Coast anger environmentalists

Jeff Rud
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The provincial government has declared B.C.'s North Coast off-limits to fish farms -- at least for now.

Agriculture Minister Pat Bell announced yesterday a moratorium on any finfish farms north of Aristazabal Island, 150 kilometres south of the mouth of the Skeena River.

Opponents of fish farms, who say the operations pose risks to the environment and wild fish, were pleased.

At the same time it announced the moratorium, however, the province also approved two finfish-farm licences and one scallop-farm licence, all on the South Coast.

The decision to suspend fish farms on the North Coast was hailed by the NDP and environmentalists as significant. Bell agreed.

"This is in response to an urgency around ensuring that [an area] that has not had finfish aquaculture is protected until we figure out how to move forward with a long-term vision for aquaculture in the province," the minister said. "This is not something that I took lightly."

The move comes 10 months after an all-party committee of the legislature proposed a North Coast moratorium, among other steps.

NDP critic Robin Austin, who chaired the committee, called the moratorium "great news for everybody who lives on the North Coast.

"When we went around with the committee ... everywhere on the North Coast they spoke with one voice and they said: 'Listen, we don't want fish farms up here.' So it doesn't surprise me that the government has recognized that."

Austin added that Bell's move is "to a certain extent, a tacit recognition that fish farms do indeed cause environmental damage."

Now government needs to act on other committee recommendations, such as following farms on the migratory routes of salmon and moving to closed containment, he said.

Austin was also disappointed that the moratorium doesn't begin at Cape Caution, on the north side of Queen Charlotte Strait, and "grandfather" existing fish farms in the Klemtu area, as the committee suggested.

Bell described the moratorium as an interim step while his ministry works with the First Nations Leadership Council to develop its strategy. The decision freezes three finfish-farm applications on the North Coast that government would have otherwise had to deal with.

"This is a pretty major signal to First Nations, to the environmental community, to the industry, that the industry's going to look different down the road," Bell said. "We're very serious about trying to find a balance between the environment and the economic interests."

But while environmentalists hailed the moratorium, they were angered by more licences announced in the south. In a statement, the Coastal Alliance for Aquaculture Reform said "the disregard shown for the health of B.C.'s south and central coast is troubling."

Grieg Seafood B.C. was issued a finfish-farm licence to grow Atlantic salmon in Nootka Sound on Muchalat Inlet.

It is the sixth site granted in a settlement with the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nations. Only four will operate at any one time.

The other finfish licence went to Creative Salmon Company Ltd. to raise chinook salmon on the southwest corner of Warne Island, at the entrance of Tofino Inlet. This site lies in Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations territory and is a replacement for a relocated licence.

"There's no net increase of sites," Bell said. "It's a better management standard that will be in place as a result."

Government also approved a subsurface scallop farm near Bowser for Island Scallops. "The scallops will be grown 30 feet under the surface about 1 1/2 kilometres offshore," Bell said. "This process is new in B.C. and one we think maybe holds promise."

The ministry also declined an application by Discovery Diving Ltd. for a geoduck farm near Sechelt.

jrud@tc.canwest.com

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