

CHILE GOVT RECOMMENDS SALMON CRISIS MEASURES

Contributed by Benjamin Witte
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Terram's Francisco Pinto wishes govt had gone further
Photo by Benjamin Witte

The Chilean government's emergency salmon committee, convened in late April to confront ongoing problems in Chile's US\$2.2 billion aquaculture industry, has come up with its first list of recommendations. Among other things, the committee is calling for a comprehensive study to determine exactly how much salmon production Chilean waters can handle. Environmental organizations and local fishermen groups have demanded such a study for years, arguing that salmon companies have stretched the capacity of Region X's coastal waters beyond the breaking point.

Chilean salmon farms produce, on average, 25 kilos per cubic meter, according to the Santiago-based environmental NGO Fundación Terram. In Norway, the world's leading farmed salmon producer, the concentration is significantly lower: 15 kilos per cubic meter.

The committee, technically a part of the Ministry of Economy, is also calling for changes to Chile's Aquaculture Environmental Regulation (RAMA) and Sanitary Regulation (RESA). So far the group hasn't specified exactly what those changes are other than to say it wants to revise rules pertaining to the import of fish eggs.

"Right now the industry, because of its growth, must adapt to the new conditions it faces so that it can continue to develop the way it has in recent years. Without a doubt, this situation involves institutional, environmental and sanitary challenges," Economy Minister Hugo Lavados told members of the press late last week.

Other recommendations include speeding up the process by which salmon concessions are transferred among companies, reviewing the status of pending concessions in Regions X, XI and XII and upping the budget for the National Fishing Service (SERNAPESCA) so that the government body can better control the spread of Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA).

ISA is a highly contagious fish virus that was first detected in Chilean waters last July and continues to be a major contributor to the industry's recent slowdown. The virus can be lethal to fish but does not affect humans. SERNAPESCA's official list of infected fish farms now totals 21, approximately half of which belong to industry leader Marine Harvest, a Norwegian-owned company.

The ISA problem has spelled significant financial losses for Marine Harvest and other companies, which have slashed jobs in recent months. Just this month Japanese-owned Salmenes Antartica fired approximately 200 workers in Region XI (PT, June 3). The company let another 300 people go earlier in the year. In April Mainstream fired 260 workers in Quemchi, Chiloé (PT, April 18). One week earlier Marine Harvest shut its Puerto Montt-based Chinquihue processing plant, laying off more than 600 people (PT, April 15).

"We as workers aren't on good footing right now," Ricardo Casas of the Federation of Fishing Industry Workers told the Patagonia Times last week. "There's major uncertainty. Workers from the other companies feel like they could be next. Given the fact that this industry's been allowed to regulate itself, the sanitary situation has everyone on edge."

The job losses, combined with a spate of bad press, have created something of a crisis climate within Chile's salmon industry, which after growing by an average of 20 percent between 2003 and 2006, expanded by just 2 percent last year.

One of the government's primary responses to the crisis was the formation of the emergency salmon committee. The group is being led by Felipe Sandoval, the former head of the government's Fishing Undersecretaries Office (SUBPESCA). Other members of the committee include current Fishing Undersecretary Jorge Chocair, Production Promotion Authority Vice President Carlos Alvarez, SERNAPESCA Director Félix Inostroza, Marina Undersecretary Carolina Echeverría, Luis Pichott of the Chile Foundation and scientist Bernabé Santelices (PT, April 24).

SalmonChile, the industry's private producers' association, applauded the committee's handling of the situation. "We trust that the work carried out by the committee will effectively confront the new challenges facing the industry," said SalmonChile President César Barros. "These types of signals show how much the government values important productive sectors like ours, which create jobs, and introduce development and

innovation in the southernmost parts of the country.”

Fundación Terram, on the other hand, found the committee’s recommendations to be seriously lacking. The environmental NGO was hoping, for example, that the emergency group would look into the reported overuse here of antibiotics. Terram is also concerned about how the salmon industry affects native fish stocks. Studies suggest that between five and 10 kilos of native fish are needed to create the food pellets used to produce one kilo of salmon. “None of that was covered,” Terram’s Francisco Pinto told the Patagonia Times.

“We think this is the moment to take advantage and really question how (salmon) is being produced. We need to come up with a really powerful proposal right now. Part of it is addressing the (industry’s) environmental impact. But we also have to look at the social issues involved, which are totally connected,” said Pinto. “The environmental and sanitary problems are creating major unemployment in an industry that prides itself on producing lots of jobs.”

In late April, Terram and Oxfam Chile joined groups such as the National Confederation of Chilean Artisan Fishermen and Aysén’s Association of Artisan Fishing Organizations (PT, March 7/April 7) in calling for a moratorium on expansion of the farmed salmon industry.

According to Pinto, Terram’s demand still stands. “Given the current production system, we don’t think it’s prudent to continue awarding concessions,” he said. “We’re not against the industry. Totally the opposite. We’re for the industry, as long as it can be environmentally friendly. But if they continue to apply the same system they’ve applied in Region X, then very likely the same problems will continue.”

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