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**Subject: Science Matters I Virus is another sign of failure to protect wild salmon**

## Virus is another sign of failure to protect wild salmon

In 2007 and 2008, a virus wiped out millions of salmon on fish farms in [Chile](#), slamming the country's aquaculture industry with \$2 billion in losses, farm and processing-plant closures, and layoffs of 2,000 workers. Now that same virus, infectious salmon anemia, has been found in wild salmon from B.C.'s [Rivers Inlet](#).

The virus normally affects Atlantic salmon, which is what most salmon farms on B.C.'s coast raise, but it can spread and mutate quickly. Scientists confirm that the virus found in the sockeye salmon from River's Inlet was the European strain, which means it almost certainly came from a fish farm. We don't yet know what [its effect on Pacific sockeye salmon](#) will be, but it could be catastrophic, especially considering all the other threats B.C.'s wild salmon are facing. There is no vaccine or treatment for infectious salmon anemia (which does not affect humans).

Salmon are more than just a commodity; they are an integral part of [West Coast ecosystems](#) and culture. They provide food for marine predators and bears, eagles, and other animals along the rivers and lakes where they spawn. The nitrogen and other nutrients they bring from the ocean are spread to the coastal forests by animals that feed on the fish. Salmon also provide a healthy source of nutrition for people and have been an important element of First Nations cultures for many generations. Losing them would be devastating to local economies and would have a profound impact on coastal ecosystems.

Infectious salmon anemia is just the latest in a list of threats identified during the Cohen Commission of Inquiry into the Decline of Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River. It's also one of several that have been linked to open net-pen fish farms. The problem of declining salmon populations is obviously bigger than the sum of its threats. Overfishing, habitat destruction, pollution, and fish farms are all issues that can only be dealt with by addressing the larger structural challenges that plague fisheries management in Canada.

[The Cohen Commission](#) is wrapping up its hearings and will report to government at the end of June 2012. The David Suzuki Foundation, as part of the Conservation Coalition represented by [Ecojustice](#), submitted recommendations on October 17. One of the coalition's main conclusions was that we can't protect wild salmon until we change the way government and Fisheries and Oceans Canada operate. To begin, Fisheries and Oceans is charged with promoting the fish-farming industry, which is

absurd. It should focus on its primary mandate of using strong science and monitoring and enforcement to conserve fish.

Canada has a strong conservation tool with its [Wild Salmon Policy](#). But even though it was released in 2005, it has yet to be implemented. Without the policy, and with conflicting mandates and budget cutbacks, the [DFO](#) has not been able to do its job properly. The government should restore the independence and transparency of science by re-establishing an independent fisheries research board. Instead of cutting budgets, it should provide money and resources to monitor and enforce regulations to protect fish and habitat. It could start by putting money now used to promote industry into science and conservation.

The government should also address major [threats to wild salmon](#) by getting open net-cage salmon farms off wild salmon migration routes and making sure endangered stocks are not overfished. But that's just a start. We need to move from open net-pen fish farming to [closed-containment](#) systems that eliminate interaction between farmed and wild salmon. The government should also do more to confront climate change, which will have an impact on salmon and all marine species.

The [problems](#) may seem overwhelming, but with strong policies and regulations, adequate resources, and a Fisheries and Oceans department focused on protecting fish, we can start to address them. Justice Bruce Cohen has heard from many people and groups, and we're confident that his report will be thorough. Of course, we hope and expect that he will include the [recommendations](#) of the [Conservation Coalition](#) as well as other environmental groups, First Nations, and all stakeholders who care about the survival of wild Pacific salmon. It will then be up to the government to act quickly on the recommendations. The salmon depend on it. And we depend on the salmon.

*Written with contributions from David Suzuki Foundation editorial and communications specialist Ian Hanington.*

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