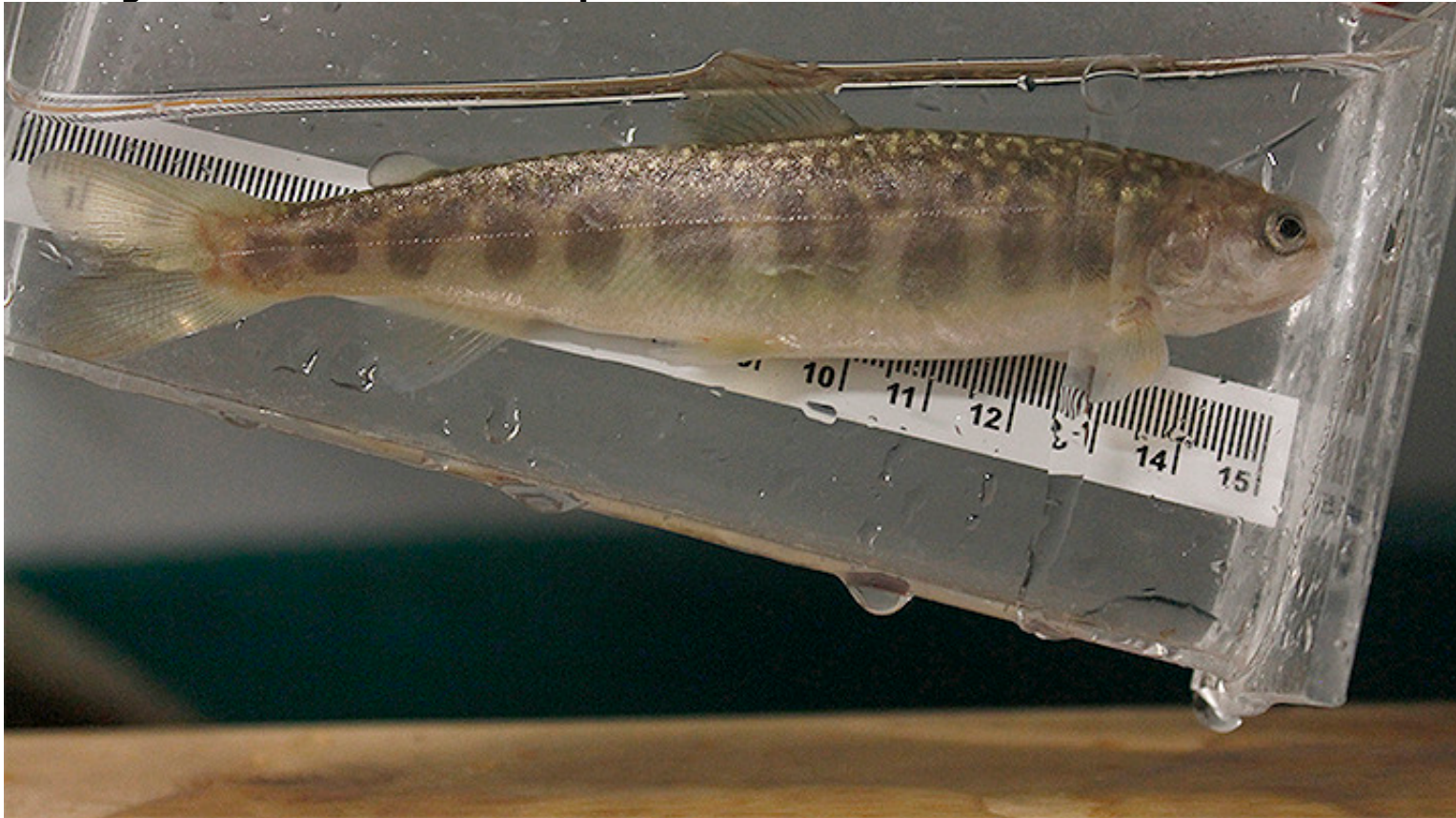


Okanagan charr farm survives upstream battle



By Penticton Western News
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Taking shape inside a cluster of buildings on a rural property near Oliver is a fish farm its owner insists poses no threat to the environment, yet has generated considerable concern among some scientists.

With several thousand Arctic charr fry already on site, Gary Klassen expects construction to finish this fall, at which point production will ramp up to an estimated 50,000 kilograms of fish each year to sell through a wholesaler to restaurants.

"I guess we like the idea of some sustainable protein. We think it's a good way to grow fish," said Klassen, who sold his metal fabrication business in northern Alberta several years ago and moved his family to the Okanagan.

While casting about for new business opportunities, Klassen settled on the idea of non-traditional farming to capitalize on a consumer trend towards local food.

He chose Arctic charr partly because his well water is 12 C and considered "optimum" for the species.

"The other thing about charr is it's sought after by chefs," Klassen said. "It's a high-end fish and we think it'll be profitable."

But the facility's location, about a hundred metres from the Okanagan River, into which it will discharge treated wastewater, means it's also controversial.

RISKY BUSINESS

The project created a range of worries for B.C. government scientist Tara White, who reviewed the application documents Klassen submitted to obtain an aquaculture licence from Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

In a May 2012 email to colleagues, White, a senior fisheries biologist for the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, drafted a 12-point list of issues she felt the application didn't adequately address.

Her email was among hundreds of pages of documents obtained by the *Western News* under freedom of information legislation.

Chief among White's concerns was the potential risk to native species if Arctic charr escape into the Okanagan River, although she noted the facility is a contained environment and the risk of escape through the triple-screened wastewater treatment system is "likely low," as are the fishes' chances of survival during hot summer months.

"If fish were to escape during the winter months, however, the risk to native stocks and ecosystem health increases significantly," she wrote.

"Potential risks to native species include disease transfer, competition for food and habitat and hybridization."

White was also worried about the temperature of, and potential contaminants in, the wastewater.

"Discharge of effluent into the (Okanagan) River may further aggravate water quality issues," she wrote, adding it is also unclear if the wastewater treatment system would be "sufficient to filter nitrates and pharmaceutical... and prevent pathogen transfer to the Okanagan River system."

Klassen insists it is.

CLEAN TECHNOLOGY

Each of the facility's 13 main tanks, the largest of which has a capacity of 50,000 litres, incorporate swirl separators to siphon off solids that fall to the bottom of the vessels.

Water bearing those solids will be piped to a separate building, where it will pass through a series of settling tanks before flowing through a 50-micron drum filter on its way to the environment.

Klassen expects to reuse up to 70 per cent of the water that flows into the facility with the help of specialized equipment to remove carbon dioxide from the water and add fresh oxygen.

Effluent discharge is approved under a separate licence from the B.C. government that sets limits for non-filterable residue and phosphorous concentrations in the wastewater.

The fish farm boasts an ozone machine that Klassen expects will neutralize any pathogens that develop, thereby eliminating the need for pharmaceuticals.

Also, because of the design of the wastewater system, Klassen is confident no fish will escape into the river.

He acknowledged a person could purposefully remove fish from the facility without his knowledge and introduce them into another body of water, but pointed out that all of the eggs he imports go through a sterilization process that's up to 99 per cent effective. In her email, White estimated a 95 per cent success rate.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada, which solicited feedback from B.C. government officials, is satisfied with Klassen's plans and issued his licence in September 2012, 16 months after his initial application.

MANAGING IMPACTS

In an application summary that recommended the licence approval, Michelle Manning, an aquaculture management co-ordinator for Fisheries and Oceans Canada, wrote that all biological impacts of the facility were found to be manageable.

The review "determined that potential environmental impacts are low and can be mitigated by well established and understood standard mitigation practices," she wrote, such as triple-screening of wastewater to prevent escapes and other conditions imposed by provincial regulations.

If a fish did escape, Klassen's licence would require him to promptly report the breach.

Accidents do happen.

SWIMMING FREELY

During a review of Klassen's separate application to import eggs from the Icy Waters hatchery near Whitehorse, Ian Keith, a field operations veterinarian for Fisheries and Oceans Canada, pointed out there had previously been a tank collapse at that very facility.

"Assumedly Icy Waters is run by experts and yet they had this disaster," Keith wrote in a June 2012 email.

Yukon Environment spokesperson Nancy Campbell confirmed that in May 2003, Icy Waters reported a tank liner had been breached and up to 23,000 juvenile fish spilled onto a road where most died.

Some, however, made into a ditch connected to a nearby lake system.

"Incidentally, the charr that made it to the Hidden Lakes grew up to be popular with anglers," Campbell said via email.

"There are no recent reports of charr caught from the lakes, although some may remain there."

VOCAL OPPONENT

Osoyoos Mayor Stu Wells had long been a vocal opponent of Klassen's fish farm due partly to his concerns about the possibility of a similar incident in the South Okanagan, but his stance changed after a site visit earlier this month.

"I was very, very impressed with the operation and the knowledge that the operator has, the back-up he has," said Wells.

The mayor, also chairman of the Okanagan Basin Water Board, was reassured by Klassen's impromptu offer to appoint a qualified inspector to keep tabs on the operation and report back to the community.

But Wells was disappointed that Fisheries and Oceans Canada did not hold public consultations before issuing Klassen's licence, and he's also worried staff reductions at the agency will reduce its ability to police the new facility.

"They've cut it back so far they've got no employees.... If something goes awry, there's nobody there," Wells said.

"We've got a very, very delicate salmon fishery going on (downstream in Osoyoos Lake), and it's just so important and so crucial for so many different reasons that it continues to be strong and healthy."

RANDOM INSPECTIONS

Fisheries and Oceans Canada spokesperson Melanie McNabb said in a statement the agency has a 50-person staff devoted to B.C. aquaculture, for which it assumed responsibility in 2010.

In the 14 months ended March 31, 2013, that team conducted inspections at 18 freshwater facilities in B.C., representing just a fraction of the 114 licensees in the province, according to the agency's most recent online list.

McNabb said officers conduct site inspections and technical audits to ensure fish farms are complying with licence conditions, and can lay charges under the Fisheries Act.

She also noted the department "does not conduct public consultation on individual aquaculture applications," but is working on a new planning process to allow for public input on management of freshwater aquaculture.

CHANGING IMAGE

Klassen knows he's facing an uphill battle to fight the industry's image problem.

"I think there's public perception that fish farms are bad, and I'm hoping to prove that's not so by doing it responsibly," he said.

He's optimistic the offer of a community inspector will prove to people he's serious about accountability.

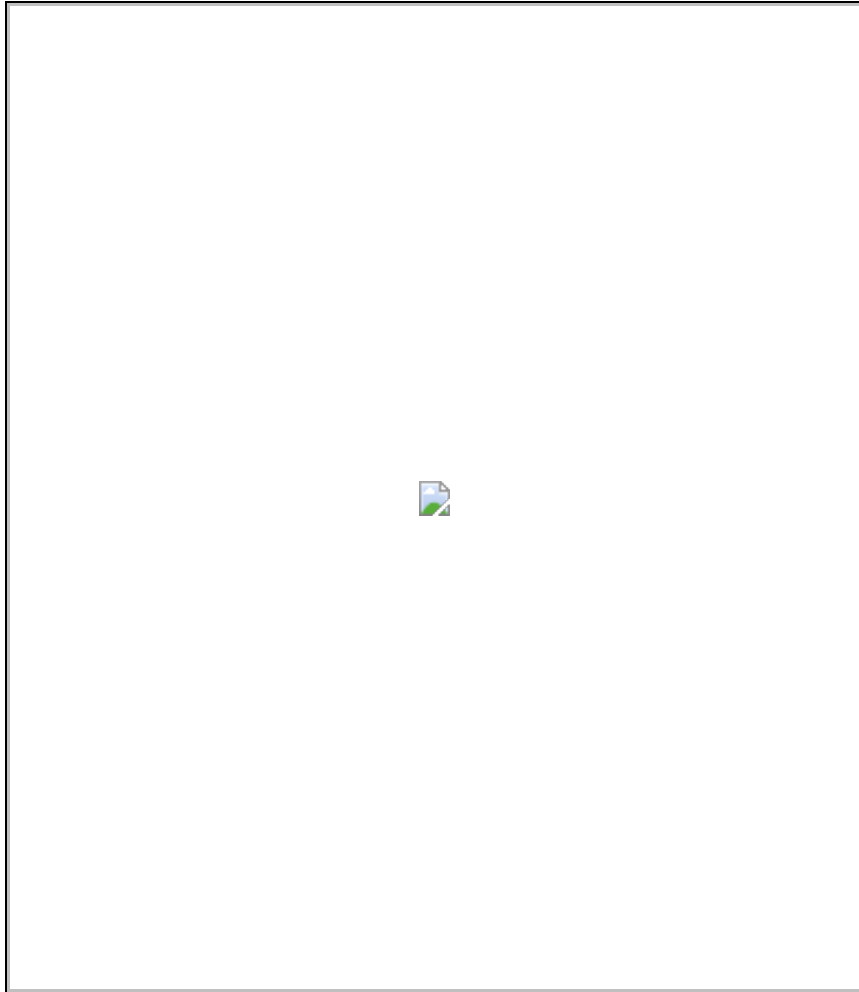
"It would give some of the people that have legitimate concerns... a degree of comfort they don't have now," Klassen said, "because they don't know how responsible I am."

See the documents that are cited in this story:

[Ministry of Environment FOI](#)

[Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations FOI](#)

[Fisheries and Oceans Canada FOI](#)



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