

Discovery Islands stay Salmon Farm Free: Federal Court of Appeal

VANCOUVER / UNCEDED xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (MUSQUEAM), Skwxwú7mesh (SQUAMISH), AND səliłwətał (TSLEIL-WAUTUTH) TERRITORIES — The Federal Court of Appeal today issued a decision on an appeal by MOWI against then Fisheries Minister Joyce Murray’s decision to keep salmon farms in the Discovery Islands shuttered. Farms have been closed there since early 2021, when licence extensions were first denied. Minister Murray made an express finding that science required that she make a precautionary decision about the licences and today’s decision confirms that choice.

The Federal Court decision under appeal also confirmed the Minister’s ability to refuse aquaculture licenses based on conservation concerns. Ecojustice represented Living Oceans Society and colleagues the David Suzuki Foundation, Georgia Strait Alliance, Watershed Watch Salmon Society, and independent biologist Alexandra Morton in the case.

The Discovery Islands are a critical migration route for Fraser River sockeye and other salmon populations. Research shows that fish farms in these waters expose wild salmon to parasites and diseases, which was a contributing factor to steep population declines. Since farms have been removed from Sechelt, the Discovery Islands and the Broughton Archipelago, the Salmon Coast Field Station has reported healthier-looking juvenile salmon with fewer salmon lice each year. Returns of adult salmon have increased as well, with this year’s Fraser River sockeye returns outperforming the forecast by over 400 per cent.

“We all owe a debt of gratitude to these Ministers who stood firm in showing the Department of Fisheries what precautionary decision-making looks like,” said Karen Wršten, Executive Director at Living Oceans Society. “Departmental advice was to re-issue the Discovery Islands licences but both Ministers took the time to hear from independent scientists who have published extensively on the harm caused by salmon farms.”

The government has promised to end open-net fish farming across B.C. by 2029, but has yet to deliver the long-awaited Salmon Aquaculture Transition Plan or to define what technology will be permitted for use after the ban takes effect.

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