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A renewed approach to aquaculture

We're all familiar with the old sayings: "Better safe than sorry" and "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Beginning in the 1980's, policy makers began using these aphorisms to describe the underpinnings of something called the "precautionary principle".

It's a concept at the heart of many applications in science. And it is something that will increasingly underpin how Canada will approach and manage aquaculture.

The precautionary principle was a cornerstone of a suite of measures I announced last month as Canada's Minister of Fisheries and Oceans that will ensure Canada's aquaculture industry is economically successful and environmentally sustainable.

The opportunity

Nearly half of all fish consumed by humans currently comes from aquaculture. Global demand for seafood as high-protein nourishment will continue to increase. This will place unprecedented pressure on wild fish stocks. Currently, over 90% of the planet's wild fish stocks are being either fished to the legal maximum or overfished. It is clear the world needs aquaculture.

Over two-thirds of Canada's farmed salmon production occurs here in British Columbia. The potential economic opportunities for coastal, rural and Indigenous communities in this province are significant.

However, controversy has existed for years over concerns about the industry's potential environmental impacts – particularly its possible effects on wild salmon.

Canada will only be able to secure the economic opportunity offered by aquaculture if industry and governments can provide comfort to Canadians that aquaculture activities are being undertaken in a manner that is environmentally sustainable.

A new approach

It's time to refresh the federal government's approach to aquaculture by emphasizing more fulsome implementation of the precautionary principle to govern our risk management approach.

This means rising above the scientific debate and asking the following question: if those with concerns about environmental impacts were eventually found to be correct, which of their concerns would be most damaging to the environment and what should our plan

be to ensure such potential impacts are mitigated now?

One of the primary concerns, for example, is the potential for viruses to infect wild juvenile salmon where open-net farms are situated along migratory pathways of wild salmon.

Irrespective of one's view of the scientific questions at play, applying the precautionary principle means that we should reflect on the wisdom of siting fish farms along migratory routes.

In the new federal framework, this means moving towards an area-based approach to managing aquaculture – an approach that takes into consideration unique environmental, social, economic and cumulative factors when identifying potential areas for aquaculture development.

This is precisely the discussion that has recently taken place here in BC regarding the Broughton Archipelago where the federal government has committed to working with BC, industry and First Nations to address concerns and to model the area-based management approach.

New technologies

Another element of our new approach is a significant focus on emerging technologies that can enable further advancements in sustainable environmental management. These include land-based and ocean-based closed-containment as well as open-ocean or offshore aquaculture.

Recently we announced that, in partnership with the Province of BC, we are launching an expedited technical and economic study of these technologies. Results are expected by the summer and will inform future technology development efforts and policy.

New legislative and regulatory framework

On the legislative side of the equation, last month I chaired a meeting of the Canadian Council for Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministers at which we achieved unanimous support for a first ever federal Aquaculture Act – which will bring additional clarity and transparency for stakeholders and Canadians as to how aquaculture will be managed to achieve responsible and environmentally sustainable growth.

The aquaculture sector has been a major focus for me as a BC MP and now as Canada's Minister of Fisheries and Oceans. The Government of Canada is firmly committed to making aquaculture both prosperous and environmentally sustainable.

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