

A couple of weeks ago Andrew Williams, writing in this space, asked “What are fish farms?” He provided one answer; we’d like to offer another.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, aquaculture is the world’s fastest growing food producing sector. This is good news from a health perspective because salmon, rich in Omega 3, is an important part of a healthy diet. But it also means that during a peak catch year, wild salmon can only supply about one-third of growing worldwide demand.

To meet increasing demand for salmon without placing undue pressure on wild stocks the continued development of a sustainable aquaculture industry is both necessary and beneficial.

Salmon farming has been practiced in British Columbia for about 30 years. Today, there are about 80 salmon farms operating in B.C. and the industry is regulated by a total of 52 provincial and federal acts and standards. For the past five years, farmed salmon has been BC’s largest agricultural export, generating sales of approximately \$450 million, and employing about 4000 people. Most of the jobs are located in coastal communities contributing to economic and social development.

Like many other industries, aquaculture has evolved over the past three decades and public interest in health, safety and the environment have contributed to a culture of continuous improvement on BC’s salmon farms. Salmon farming is not without its critics yet as people learn about the aquaculture industry’s commitment to environmental protection many concerns about salmon farming are being addressed.

In fact, recent public opinion polling shows that a majority of British Columbians support the development of a fish farming industry in BC that does not negatively impact the environment. And respondents agree that if done in a manner which protects the marine environment, salmon farming creates an opportunity to meet rising world demand in a manner that protects wild stocks from over-fishing.

The aquaculture industry recognizes it will not be able to succeed unless it respects the importance of the cultural importance of wild salmon, uses sound ecological practices, and manages resources sustainability. Each salmon farm operating in British Columbia has programs to monitor and promote fish health, and to minimize – and fix – any impact on the ocean environment around the farms. Each farm must, as a condition of its license, develop a detailed, site-specific environmental protection plan, and each must have a fish health management plan before farming begins. Farm employees are trained in environmental management and daily water quality testing is one important monitoring job. In addition, farmers use underwater cameras to monitor the amount of food the fish eat and to prevent excess food from littering the ocean floor, and farms are fallowed on a regular basis to support a healthy environment under the farm site. Regular underwater maintenance of nets prevents fish escapes and the funding of research and development activities in conjunction with major universities and professional associations supports innovation in both operations and environmental protection.

As a result of these efforts many B.C. farms have earned environmental accreditation from the internationally accredited environmental management system, ISO 14001.

Fish health is also of critical importance to farmers. All smolts are checked by a veterinarian before entering the ocean water and vets play an important role ongoing role on fish farms, monitoring fish health and, if necessary, treating illness. Contrary to Mr. Williams's allegation, antibiotics are rarely used - only used to treat illness and only with a veterinarian prescription. Over the average life of a farmed salmon less than three per cent of its feed will contain any type of antibiotics, meaning salmon farming has the lowest use of antibiotics in the agriculture industry.

The choice of location for each farm is crucial to successful salmon farming and must make sense from both an environmental, social and an economic viewpoint. Years ago, when salmon farming first started in B.C., farmers chose locations along the coast which had shallow, slow-moving water. Today, it is understood that deep, fast-moving water is better for both the environment and the quality of the salmon.

We share Mr. Williams's concern about the health of wild salmon populations in BC and we recognize it is legitimate. In 2004, the BC Auditor General issued a report documenting more than a dozen different factors which pose a risk to wild salmon populations. But with global demand for salmon growing, we see salmon farming not as a threat but as one way to protect a precious — and finite — resource, B.C.'s wild salmon.