

By ROB BROWN
Spin unravelled

A few weeks back Mary Ellen Walling, shill and apologist for fish farmers, filled a guest column in this paper intended to rebut an earlier condemnation of fish farms by my learned friend, Andrew Williams. Walling's PR is such disingenuous bumph it begs for dissection.

The folks at the UN, who monitor such things, say that aquaculture is the fastest growing food producer, crows Walling, claiming this to be a good thing from a health perspective because salmon is filled with Omega-3 fatty acids and farmed salmon will do much to feed the masses.

What she conveniently omits is that farmed fish also pack around antibiotics, dyes, pesticides, mercury and other heavy metals, and that the amount of healthful Omega fats they contain is less than the amount found in mother nature's product.

Also absent from Walling's defence is the fact that a lot of aquatic species lower down the food chain are ground up to feed the faux salmon raised on the farm. In fact, the process represents a net withdrawal of nutrients from the marine food banks of the world.

We are supposed to be impressed by the fact that fish farming has been practised in B.C. for 30 years and that it generates a lot of capital - a whopping \$450 million, claims Walling. So what? say I.

Fish farms have been operating a lot longer on Scotland's west coast, which is why there are almost almost no wild salmon returning to the rivers on that side of the country.

Walling would have us believe that somehow the longevity and profitability of that industry make it a good thing? The tobacco industry has been thriving on this continent for more than two centuries now, and it's been enormously profitable. Would we all be better off if it had never existed?

Walling and her ilk never factor the loss of wild fish, jobs in the fishing industry, and the enormous long-term environmental costs into their accounting, just as the tobacco industry never has room on its balance sheets for the societal costs of lung cancer and cardiovascular disease.

"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 of B.C.'s salmon farms," writes Walling.

Well, that's good news! We should be heartened to learn that farms have underwater cameras to prevent food from spilling through pens and contaminating the ocean floor.

We should be pleased that fish farmers have had to develop an environmental protection plan for their sites as a condition of licensing. We should also celebrate the fact that the nets in the salmon pens get regular maintenance.

Underwater photography may help the conscientious fish farmer keep some excess feed from hitting the ocean floor, but how does it help contain all the fecal matter produced by huge schools of penned fish?

Curiously, Walling makes no mention of the fact that the pollution from a single fish farm is on par with that from a small town, that Canadian fish farms still discharge more than 10,000 tons of uneaten food annually, and that fallowed or not, the ocean floor under fish farms is a dead zone.

Walling's suggestion that well mended and tended nets will solve the problem of contaminated exotic salmon from escaping is a red herring.

Farmed fish go over the top in heavy seas. They've done so for three decades and continue to do so. When you have more Atlantic Salmon than steelhead in Van Isle's Salmon River, you have tangible proof of this.

"Fish health is also of critical importance to farmers," writes Walling. Of course it is, just as the health of his swine is important to a pig farmer and the health of his herd is a serious issue with a cattle rancher.

Notwithstanding this concern on the part of farmers, we have suffered through swine flu, millions perished from smallpox, many millions more died from tuberculosis and now we have to contend with avian flu, mad cow and quotidian doses of E. coli.

When you crowd critters into small spaces you increase their susceptibility to disease and the risk of disease transference as happened when disease ridden fish farm escapees spread disease to wild Atlantic salmon in some of Norway's most famous salmon rivers.

Conspicuously absent from Walling's piece is any mention of sea lice or the vile pesticides fish farmers use to fight them. The reason for this is that Walling knows as well as I do that the sea lice problem is devastating to wild salmon and there is no effective way to eradicate it.

Such is the modus operandi of the PR hack: trot out some vague facts, steer away from the inconvenient truths and create the big lie.