

Intrafish, 5th May

Study says farmed sablefish not economically, ecologically viable in British Columbia

Seattle, USA: Researchers at the University of British Columbia released a report Wednesday saying the fledgling sablefish farming industry in the province won't provide much, if any, economic impact to the region.

The report, "Ecological and Economic Impact Assessment of Sablefish Aquaculture in British Columbia," analyzes aquaculture and sablefish market information to identify potential consequences of introducing industrial-scale sablefish farming in B.C. To read the report [click here](#)

One of the study's authors, U. Rashid Sumaila, director of the university's fisheries economics research unit, said he began the study more than a year ago with the idea there would be ecological problems associated with sablefish farming, but that the economics of the industry would look positive.

"When I went to study this is what I expected at least economics look at very good," he told IntraFish on Wednesday. "But it wasn't looking good, and the ecological and market effects were driving down the benefits."

Among its findings, the report says

Because of the potential for negative interactions between wild and farm stocks, coastal communities and B.C.'s marine environment will be exposed to some risk;

A decrease in the price of sablefish will ultimately follow an increase in sablefish supply to the market from aquaculture. This decrease will be at the expense of both sablefish farmers and fishers in Canada, but beneficial to sablefish fish consumers. Since virtually all sablefish is consumed outside Canada, benefits are exported while costs are entirely absorbed within Canada;

At low aquaculture production levels, small economic gains under certain conditions are possible. These gains disappear as production increases to anticipated levels;

A ban on sablefish farming in B.C. might be beneficial to the province, if wild sablefish could be marketed in a way to command a price premium of 20 percent to 25 percent;

From the experience of salmon farming in B.C., sablefish farming is unlikely to add to B.C. and Canada's GDP, export earnings and employment in the B.C. sablefish sector.

"The message from this study is that we need to tread gently and think more creatively than we have in the past," study co-author John Volpe of the university's School of Environmental Studies said in a release. "This report

leaves little doubt that over time the value of sablefish would be gutted, as has been the fate of salmon, and underscores that support for industrial-scale sablefish aquaculture would signal that our policy makers have learned little from the salmon aquaculture experience."

Asked if it was fair to compare sablefish aquaculture to salmon farming, since Norway already was a dominant player in the farmed salmon market before B.C. began salmon farming in earnest in the 1980s, and no one else anywhere outside of B.C. presently grows sablefish, Sumaila said whatever advantage would come from being first eventually would be lost, as countries than can produce the same fish cheaper get involved.

While acknowledging it is possible B.C., by virtue of being first out of the gate, could become a dominant player in farmed sablefish, Sumaila said: "The main thing is B.C. is simply a high-cost country. Being first and making a move might be an advantage, but that only lasts for a while before low-cost countries learn the tricks and use their cost advantage to again push us out."

The report was partially funded by the Canadian Sablefish Association, which represents fishermen who catch wild sablefish in B.C. waters. The association has engaged in a series of legal skirmishes with sablefish farm proponents to stop them from developing the industry.

Sumaila says he expected to receive some criticism for accepting money from the association representing wild sablefish fishermen, but defended the decision to do so, saying the money was needed to help "graduate student assistants who had to eat." Sumaila says, despite the source of some of the funding, he hopes people will objectively look at the data and see that the conclusions reached are a result of the facts, not because one group paid for the report and expected to see the conclusions come out a certain way.

"Everybody gets money to do these studies from one source or another," he said. "The key thing is going into the report, check the data and see what we did there. I really tried to get a lot of people to read the report; it was reviewed by many of my top colleagues to try to check it for balance."

<http://www.intrafish.com/articlea.php?articleID=53863>